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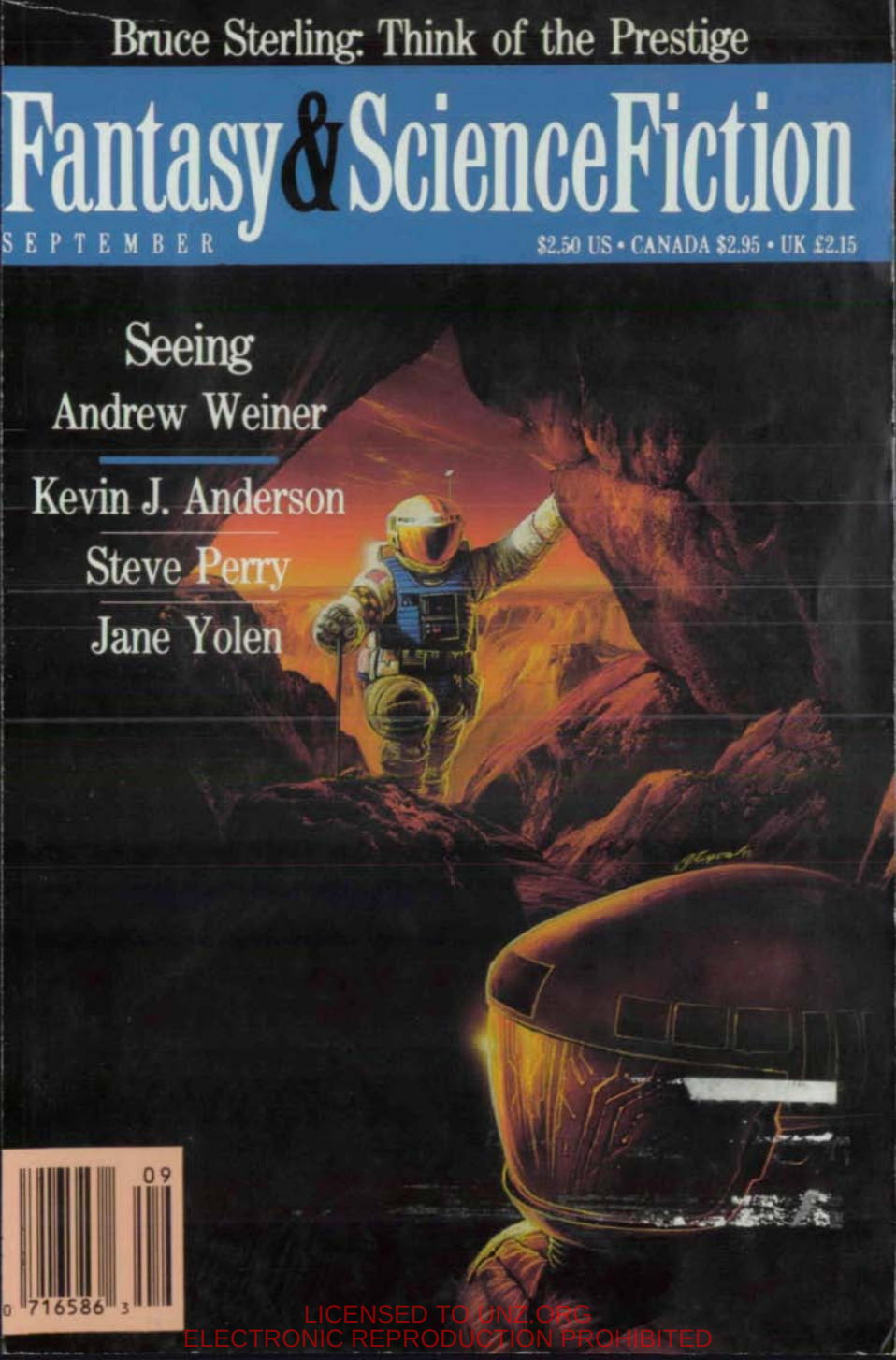

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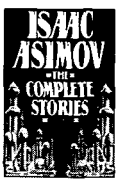

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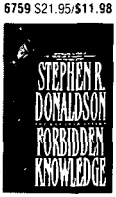

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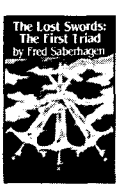

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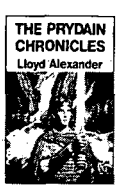

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SEPTEMBER • 43rd Year of Publication

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GENERAL OFFICE: 14 JEWELL ST. CORNWALL, CT 06753
EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 11526, EUGENE, OR 97440

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

A FEW YEARS ago, the New York Times did a wonderful essay celebrating the anniversary of the Iowa Writers Workshop. The Iowa Writers Workshop is a highly prestigious writing program attached to the University of Iowa. Many well-known mainstream writers attended, and so did writers who made a reputation in science fiction and fantasy. People in the know consider the Iowa Writers Workshop one of the main influences on current American literature, and the workshop has justly received the attention it deserves.

This summer, another influential writers workshop is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary — and it is not receiving the attention it deserves. Clarion Writers Workshop, a summer-long program attached to Michigan State University, and its spin-off, Clarion West, held in Seattle, have trained a large portion of writers working today. Some of those writers have gone on to careers in editing. Others have found a place in the Screenwriters Guild. And even more have gone on to publish fiction, the bulk of which has been science fiction, fantasy and horror.

Clarion began at Clarion College in Pennsylvania in the late sixties. Robin Scott Wilson wanted to use working writers to teach writing. Wilson has gone on to other academic venues, but his first choice instructors, Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm, have taught at every Clarion class. During the years, Clarion has moved from Pennsylvania to Louisiana to its home in Michigan. Most of the writers in the field have taught there at one point or another.

Accurate statistics about the workshop don't exist because many of the records from the early days are gone. But Clarion has trained writers from Edward Bryant and Vonda McIntyre to Lucius Shepard and Kathe Koja. I attended Clarion in the eighties. Those six weeks were a turning point for me, both

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personally and artistically. I wonder if I would be writing this column if I hadn't spent the summer of 1985 at Michigan State University.

What makes Clarion work is simple: for six weeks, would-be writers immerse themselves in the writing life. In the morning, they critique stories. The afternoons, evenings and weekends are open for writing (except for the occasional lecture). Students may write as much as they want or as little. Every year has at least one student who goes through the entire workshop without writing a word, and another who writes at least one short story per week.

At the end of those six weeks, the students have enough experience to decide whether or not the writing life works for them. Some abandon the dream, choosing to become doctors, lawyers or accountants, because they have seen that the writing life is too difficult, too boring, or too uncertain for them. Others pursue the writing life with an even greater focus, writing more after they have left, working on the problems the workshop has uncovered, and eventually making sales. Still others use the contacts made at Clarion to open different doors, doors that lead to editing or to Hollywood. That doesn't mean these folks have abandoned fiction, although they may postpone it while still pursuing a career in the field.

The importance of Clarion, though, is not the effect it has on the wanna-be writer, but the impact it has had on the field. A few years ago, Dean Wesley Smith and I had occasion to make a list of the people who either attended or taught at Clarion, and we discovered that, by a ratio of two to one, the bulk of working professionals in the science fiction field have a strong connection to Clarion. The workshop has not, as its early critics thought, created a group of one-voice writers who wrote similar stories and detested flashbacks in the body of the manuscript. Instead, Clarion has managed to promote diversity, and give writers the confidence to gain their own individual voices.

Clarion's editors have worked for the *New Yorker*, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *F&SF*, *The Comics Journal*, Doubleday, St. Martin's Press, Pulphouse, and many other book publishers. Its screenwriters have written for *LA Law*, *China Beach*, *Simon and Simon*, *Monsters*, *The Twilight Zone*, and many other television shows and movies. Its writers have written some of the recent classics in both short story and novels, from *Dreamsnake* to *The Cipher*; from "GiAnts" to "Ripples in the Dirac Sea." This year's Nebula award winners from

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F&SF, Alan Brennert and Mike Conner, both attended Clarion in the 1970s.*

Quite an accomplishment, in twenty-five years. Clarion may not be celebrated with a two-page spread in the New York Times, but that doesn't diminish the impact the workshop has had on American literature in the last quarter of the twentieth century. As you read the short stories in this and other magazines this summer, as you pick up new and exciting novels, remember that these writers received their training somewhere. And, since 1967, an important part of that training came from Clarion.

Alan won for "Ma Qui" from February 1991, and Mike for "Guide Dog" from May 1991. We're pleased and proud for both of them.

"Today you are to shape clouds to resemble the following: a cute little duckie, a big fat piggy, a funny little bunny . . ."

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Kevin J. Anderson made his first professional fiction sale to F&SF *("Final Performance," January 1985). Since then, he has sold ten novels, written either individually or in collaboration. This year he has published a collection of horror short stories on tape called* Hunter's Moon and Other American Gothic Tales, *out of Spine-Tingling Press. NAL has just published* Afterimage, *a dark fantasy novel written in collaboration with me. His third collaborative science fiction novel with Doug Beason,* Assemblers of Infinity, *published by Bantam, will also appear this year. "Dogged Persistence" is a strong science fiction story set in the wilds of Oregon's coastal mountain range.*

Dogged Persistence

By Kevin J. Anderson

THE DOG stops in the middle of the road, distracted on his way to the forest. The asphalt smells damp and spicy with fallen leaves. Infrared laser-guidance posts line the shoulder at wide intervals, but most of the vehicles are of the old kind, growling inside from hot engines, belching chemical exhaust.

The twin headlights of the approaching car look like bright coins. The image fixates him, imprinting spots on his dark-adapted eyes. The dog can hear the car dominating the night noises of insects and stirring branches. The car sounds loud. The car sounds angry.

Moving with casual ease, the dog saunters toward the shoulder. But the car arrives faster than he could ever run, squealing brakes like some death scream. He hears the thud of impact, the bright explosion of pain that suddenly vanishes. He is flying through the air toward the ditch. He

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smells the spray of blood from inside his own nose.

Knowing he must hide, the dog hauls himself into the brambles, under a barbed-wire fence, to the dense foliage.

Car doors slam; running feet; the babble of voices: "Shit! That was no deer — that was a dog! A big black Lab!" "Where'd he go?" "Shit, must have crawled off to die." "Look at all the blood — and look what he did to your car!"

The dog has found a safe place. The human voices become fuzzy as black unawareness overcomes him. He will not move again until it is finished. He will be all right.

Inside his body, millions upon millions of nanomachines begin to repair the damage, cell by cell, rebuilding the entire dog. The night insects resume their music in the forest.

Patrice went to the window and watched her son bounce a tennis ball against the shed. Each impact sounded like gunshots aimed at her. She cringed. Judd didn't know any better; he remembered none of what had happened so long ago. Sixteen should have been a magic age for him, when teenage concerns achieved universal importance. In all those years, she had never let Judd come into contact with other people, much less those his own age.

She opened the screen door and stepped onto the porch, taking care to keep the worried expression off her face. Judd would consider the concern normal for her anyway.

The gray Oregon cloud cover had broken for its daily hour of sunshine. The meadow looked fresh from the previous night's rain. The patter of raindrops had sounded like creeping footsteps outside the window, and Patrice had lain awake for hours, staring at the ceiling. Now the tall pines and aspens cast morning shadows across the dirt road that led from the highway to her sheltered house.

Judd smacked the tennis ball too hard, and it sailed off to the driveway, struck a stone, and bounced into the meadow. With a shout of anger, Judd hurled his tennis racket after it. Impulsive — he became more like his father every day.

"Judd!" she called, quelling most of the scolding tone. He fetched the racket and plodded toward her. He had been restless for the past two days. "What's wrong with you?"

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Judd averted his eyes, turned instead to squint where the sunshine lit the dense pines. Far away she could hear the deep hum of a hovertruck hauling logs down the highway.

"Pancake," he finally answered. "He didn't come back yesterday, and I haven't seen him all morning."

Now Patrice understood, and she felt the relief wash inside of her. For a moment she was afraid he might have seen some stranger or heard something about them on the news. "Your dog'll be all right. Just wait and see."

"But what if he's dying in a ditch somewhere?" She could see tears on the edges of Judd's eyes. He fought hard against crying. "What if he's in a fur trap, or got shot by a hunter?"

Patrice shook her head. "I'm not worried about him. He'll come home safe and sound. He always does."

Once again Patrice felt the shudder. *Yes, he always did.*

Fifteen years before, Patrice — she had gone by the name of Trish then — had thought the world was golden. She had been married to Jerry for four years. In that time he had doubled his salary through patents and bonuses from enhanced silicon-chip development at the DyMar Laboratories.

Their one-year-old son sat in diapers in the middle of the hardwood floor, spinning around. He had deactivated his holographic cartoon companions and was playing with the dog instead. The boy knew "Ma" and "Da" and attempted to say "Pancake," though the dog's name came out more like a strangled "gaaaakk!"

Trish and Jerry chuckled together as they watched the black Labrador play with Jody. She did not start calling the baby Judd until after they had fled. Pancake romped back and forth with paws slipping on the polished floor. Jody squealed with delight. Pancake woofed and circled the baby, who tried to spin on his diapers on the floor.

"Pancake's like a puppy again," Trish said, smiling. She had owned the dog for nine years already, all through college and in her four years with Jerry. Pancake had settled into a middle-aged routine of sleeping most of the time, except for a lot of slobbering and tail wagging to greet them every day when they came home from work. But lately the dog had been more energetic and playful than he had been in years. "I wonder what

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happened to him," she said.

Jerry's grin, his short, dark hair, and heavy eyebrows made him look dashing. "Maybe all those little things that make a dog feel old got fixed inside of him. The sore joints, the stiff muscles, the bad circulation. Like a million million tiny repairmen doing a renovation."

Trish sat up and pulled her hand away from him. "Did you take him into your lab again? What did you do to him?" she raised her voice, and the words came out with cold anger. "What did you do to him!"

Trish stopped and turned to see her baby boy and the dog looking at her as if she had gone insane. What business did she have yelling when they were trying to play?

Jerry looked at her, hard. He raised his eyebrows in an expression of sincerity. "I didn't do anything. Honest."

With a woof, Pancake charged at Jody again, wagging his tail and banking aside at the last instant. The holographic cartoon characters marched back into the room, dancing to a tune only they could hear. The dog trotted right through the images to the baby. "Just look at him! How can you think anything's wrong?"

But in only four years of marriage, Trish had learned one thing, and she had learned to hate it. She could always tell when Jerry was lying.

"Mom, he's back!" Judd shouted.

For a moment, Patrice reacted with alarm, thinking of the hunters, wondering who could have found them, how she might have given themselves away — but then, through the open window, she could hear the dog barking. She looked up from the stove to see the black Labrador bounding out of the trees. Judd ran toward him so hard she expected the boy to sprawl on his face. Just what she needed, Patrice thought; he would probably break his arm. That would ruin everything. So far she had managed to avoid all contact with doctors and any other kind of people who kept names and records.

But Judd reached the dog safely, and both tried to outdo the other's enthusiasm. Pancake barked and ran around in circles, leaping into the air. Judd threw his arms around the dog's neck and wrestled him to the ground.

According to her notes, Pancake would be twenty-four years old in a few months. Nearly twice the average life span of a dog.

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Judd and Pancake raced each other back to the house. Patrice wiped her hands on a kitchen towel and came out to the porch to greet him. "I told you he'd be O.K.," she said.

Idiotically happy, Judd nodded and then stroked the dog.

Patrice bent over and ran her fingers through the black fur. The wedding ring, still on her finger after fifteen years alone, stood out among the dark strands. Pancake had a difficult time standing still for her, shifting on all four paws and letting his tongue loll out.

Other than mud spatters and a few cockleburs, she found nothing amiss. Not a mark on him. There never was.

She patted the dog's head, and Pancake rolled his deep brown eyes up at her. "I wish you could tell us stories," she said.

IN JERRY'S lab the dog paced inside his cage. He whined twice. He obviously didn't like to be confined, and he was probably confused, since Jerry had never caged him before. Pancake wagged his tail, as if hoping for a quick end to this.

Jerry paced the room, running a hand through his own dark hair, trying to kill the butterflies in his stomach. He had worked himself into self-righteous cockiness at showing the management turds just what they had spent all their money on. Progress reports went unread, or at least not understood. Memos describing their work and its implications disappeared in the piles of paper — yes, even though Ethan and O'Hara had perfectly functioning electronic-mail systems, they still insisted on old-fashioned paper memos from DyMar underlings.

He glanced at his watch. "What the hell is taking them so long?"

Beside him, Frank Peron sighed. "It's only five minutes, Jerry. You know: wait for them, but they'll never wait for you. We were lucky to get them to come down here at all."

"Considering that this breakthrough will change the universe as we know it," Jerry said, "I'd think they might want to give up a coffee break to have a look."

He couldn't take his eyes off the poster tacked up on the lab wall. It showed Albert Einstein handing a candle to someone few people would recognize by sight — K. Eric Drexler; Drexler, in turn, was extending a candle toward the viewer. *Come on, take it!* Drexler had been one of the first major visionaries behind nanotechnology some thirty years before.

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It will change the universe as we know it, Jerry thought. Pancake looked expectantly at him, then sat down in the middle of his cage. "Good boy," Jerry muttered.

"They're management boobs," Frank said. "You can't expect them to understand what it is they're funding."

At that moment, Mr. Ethan and Mr. O'Hara, two of the highest executives in DyMar Laboratories, entered the lab room, apologizing in unison for being late. Smiling, Jerry assured them that neither he nor Frank Peron had noticed.

"Dr. McKenzy, your memo was rather, uh, enthusiastic," Ethan said.

Beside him, O'Hara scowled and chose a different word. "Ebullient. Tossing around promises of immortality, the end to all disease, curing the handicapped, stopping aging —"

"Yes, sir, we felt we had to limit our discussions to only those topics," Jerry interrupted. He had to shock these two so thoroughly that they would be ready to question all their preconceptions. "Actually, this nanotechnology breakthrough opens a doorway to much more, such as an end to dirty industry, instantaneous fabrication of the most complex machines, new materials stronger than steel and harder than diamond. That's why so many people have been working on it for so long. We've all been racing each other because when it happens, it *happens.* And the first ones to break through are going to shake up society like you won't be able to imagine."

Ethan and O'Hara looked as if they had never heard so much bullshit before in their lives. *Very well,* Jerry thought, *time to haul out the big guns. Literally.*

"Watch this, please, and then we can adjourn to the conference room."

Jerry pulled out an automatic pistol from the pocket of his lab coat. He had bought it at a sporting-goods store for this purpose only. No one should have been able to smuggle a gun into the lab, but security was lax. He had brought the dog in, hadn't he? He looked at Pancake.

The two executives scrambled backward, muttering outcries. Jerry didn't give them time to do anything. He was running this show. Melodramatic though it might seem, he knew it would work.

He pointed the pistol at the dog and fired two shots. One struck Pancake's rib cage; another shattered his spine. Blood flew out from the bullet holes, drenching his fur.

Pancake yelped and then sat down from the impact. He panted.

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"My god!" Ethan shouted.

"McKenzy, what the hell do you think —," O'Hara cried.

"The first thing that happens," Jerry said, then repeated himself, yelling at the top of his lungs until he had their attention again. "The first thing that happens is that the nanomachines shut down all of the dog's pain centers."

The two executives stared wide-eyed. They were both shaking.

In his cage, Pancake looked confused with his tongue lolling out. He seemed not to notice the gaping holes in his back. After a moment he lay down on the floor of the cage, squishing his fur in the blood still running along his sides. His eyes grew heavy, and he sank down in deep sleep, resting his head on his front paws. He took a huge breath and released it slowly.

"In massive injury like this, the machines will place him in a recuperative coma. Already they are scouring the damage sites, assessing the repairs that will be needed, and starting to put him together again. They can link themselves into larger assemblies to make macro repairs." Jerry knelt down on the floor beside the cage, reached his hand in to pat Pancake on the head. "His temperature is already rising from the waste heat generated by the nanomachines. Look, the blood has stopped flowing."

"The dog's dead!" O'Hara said. "The animal activists are going to crucify us!"

"Nope. By tomorrow he'll be up and chasing jackrabbits." Jerry felt intensely pleased with himself. "I brought in my own dog so we didn't have to go through all the procurement crap to get approved experimental animals."

"You are out of a job, Dr. McKenzy!" Ethan said. His face had turned a deep red.

"I don't think so," Jerry answered, and smiled. "I'll bet you a box of dog biscuits."

The light near sunset slanted through a cut in the Oregon hills where the trees had been shaved in strips from robotic logging. The clouds had cleared again, leaving Patrice and Judd to sit by the table in the living room. The lights, sensing their presense in the household, would come on soon.

The two of them worked on a sprawling jigsaw puzzle that showed the planet Earth rising over the lunar crags, photographed from the moonbase.

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The blue-green sphere covered most of the table, with jagged gaps from a few continents not yet filled in.

Patrice and Judd talked little in the shared comfortable silence of two people who had had only their own company for a very long time. They could get by with partial sentences, cryptic comments, private jokes.

Judd knew why they had to hide from the outside world. Patrice had kept no secrets from him, explaining their situation in more complicated terms as the boy grew older and became able to comprehend. He had never complained. He knew no other life.

Outside, Pancake barked. He stood up on the porch and paced, letting a low growl loose in his throat.

Patrice stiffened and went to the lace curtains. Her mouth went dry. Somehow she knew the dog was not making one of his puppy barks at a squirrel. She had owned the dog more than half her life, and she knew him better than any human being could. This was a bark of warning.

"What is it, Mom?" Judd asked. From the drawn expression on his face, she could tell he felt the fear as much as she did. She had trained him well enough.

She could hear a vehicle toiling up the winding gravel drive away from the highway and toward the house.

The demonstrators outside DyMar Laboratories consisted of an odd mix of religious groups, labor union representatives, animal-rights activists, and who knew what else. Some were fruitcakes; some were violent.

Staring out the window, Jerry McKenzy didn't know how to deal with the mob. Maintenance had added steel bars in the past week. "We didn't get as much breathing space as we had counted on."

He paced the lab office, with his terminal and notes, brainstorming files, and records. The actual nanotech experiments were done in clean rooms in the annex building, where Jerry himself rarely went. But with the demonstrations growing, all experiments had been shut down as the DyMar execs tried to figure out what to do. But then, they were idiots anyway.

DyMar had made a fatal error in announcing the nanotechnology breakthrough to the world. Pressed for time and knowing their research facility couldn't be the only one so close to success, DyMar had blitzed

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the public with premature announcements. They had taken everyone by surprise.

The outcry in response had been swift and frightening, much more organized and aggressive than the misguided or ineffective complaints Jerry had normally seen. The protest was organized under the aegis of a new organization called "Purity" that had burst into existence with unbelievable speed.

Peron stored his file in the computer and tapped his fingers on the keyboard. "And *you* thought we'd be the only ones to grasp the implications of nanotechnology."

"It's always nice to see that some people understand more than you give them credit for," Jerry said.

Peron tugged on his lower lip. Something had been bothering him all morning. "Yeah, but don't you think those people got together too fast? Too organized? You know how screwed-up groups like that usually are."

"What are you saying?"

Peron shrugged, as if embarrassed at his suggestion. "Well, Drexler predicted back in 1985 that we'd have functioning nanotech within a decade — and that was thirty years ago! A dozen groups have been working, but somehow the crucial experiments fizzle at just the wrong times; the key data gets misprinted in technical journals. It's only because of your damned arrogance, Jerry, that we plowed our way around the usual scientific channels. Have you *checked* how often the most promising nanotech researchers move off to other fields of study, how often they die in accidents?"

Jerry blinked at the other man in astonishment. "Have you run a reality diagnostic on yourself recently, Frank? You're sounding paranoid."

Peron forced a laugh. "Sorry. This isn't exactly a high-security installation we're working in, you know. You smuggled your damned dog in here twice, and Pancake isn't a lapdog that'll fit in a glove compartment. A chain-link fence and a couple of rent-a-cops do not make me feel safe."

As if in response, the crowds outside took up a loud chant.

Jerry sat down, kicked a few of the stray pencils away from his feet, and spoke in his "let's be reasonable" voice. "Frank, some boneheaded fanatic is always trying to stop progress — but it never works. Nobody can *un*discover nanotechnology." He made a rude noise through his lips.

Jerry spent a quarter of an hour reassuring his partner, convincing him

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not to worry. With dogged persistence they could get through this mess. He felt confident when they both packed up to brave the gauntlet of protesters and go home.

But he never saw Frank Peron again.

WHEN PATRICE saw the red vehicle approaching, she squinted into the sunset and made it out to be a small American truck outfitted with laser-guidance sensors, mud-spattered and identical to a million other vehicles in Oregon. She didn't recognize the silhouette of the man behind the wheel.

She didn't have time to run.

Patrice and Judd had lived in the state for nine years, at the same location for three of them. She and her son had fled to Oregon because of its track record of survivalists, of religious cults, of extremists and isolationists — all of whom knew how to be left alone. The state's rural ultraprivacy legislation forbade any release of tax documents, credit-card transactions, or telephone records.

But the last time she had gone into a grocery store, she had noticed the cover of a weekly newsmagazine depicting the fenced-off and burning ruins of DyMar Laboratories. The headline advertised a fifteen-year retrospective on the disaster, bemoaning that all records had been lost of such an important technological breakthrough. No doubt the story would talk about how she and her son were still missing, presumed killed by Purity extremists. There would have been pictures of her — as Trish McKenzy, not Patrice Kennesy, and the boy, Jody, not Judd. On impulse she tossed the magazine into her basket.

Uneasy, she had taken her groceries and backed away from the TV guides and beef-jerkey strips and candy bars by the register. No one, she insisted to herself, would have put such a coincidence together, would have connected all the details. Still, the clerk stared at her too intently....

Now, with a grim expression on her face, Patrice stepped out on her front porch to meet the approaching stranger.

The demonstrators did not go home, not even late at night. Jerry had remained at the lab office until after ten o'clock sending a vidmessage to Trish that he wanted to finish another simulation before locking up. People massed against the chain-link fence, shouting and chanting. They

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had lit bonfires.

Somehow he could not believe that anybody but the technically literate would understand how significant a breakthrough he and Frank Peron had made. This wasn't the type of thing people normally got up in arms about — it was too complicated and required too much foresight to see how the world would change, to sort the dangers from the miracles DyMar had been promising in its PR. Who was orchestrating all this?

Like Utah's cold-fusion debacle from decades before, DyMar had made a lot of promises and produced nothing tangible. They were waiting for patent approval before releasing any details, but the red tape had been tangled — the patent office had lost the first two sets of applications, though the e-mail trace verified that they had been received and logged in. Lawyers did not return vidmessages. News of the "immortal dog" had leaked in one interview, but Jerry sure as hell was not going to shoot Pancake again in front of a TV camera just to make a point.

The dog wasn't the only one blessed with nanotechnology cell repair, though. He had seen to that himself. Nobody knew that he carried his own cell-repair machines tailored to human DNA, and it would stay that way.

Outside, he heard glass breaking, the roar of the crowd. It just didn't make any sense to him. He watched out the window. Clouds had obscured most of the stars overhead, but mercury-vapor lamps spilled garish light across the near-empty parking lot.

At the gate a team of rent-a-cops paced about holding rifles ready, probably quaking in their boots. DyMar had called for backup security from the state police, and they had been turned down. The ostensible reason was some buried statute that allowed the police to defer "internal company disputes" to private security forces. How they could consider the mob of demonstrators to be an internal company dispute, Jerry could not imagine. It felt as if somebody wanted the lab unprotected.

He heard sharp popping noises outside, and it took him a moment to realize they were gunshots. He turned to see one of the security guards fall; others ran away as a group of people streamed through a breach in the chain-link fence. He heard more gunfire.

"This is nuts!" he said to himself, then switched off the light in his lab. No use attracting them; but they would know exactly where he was working. Jerry couldn't believe it, but he knew he had to get away immediately.

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Glow from the parking-lot lights mixed with the dim EXIT sign to give him enough illumination to move. He slipped out of the room and hesitated, wondering if he should call the police or the fire department. Someone smashed the front doors downstairs. He had no time.

They would ransack the place and destroy his work. Jerry tried to think if he could save anything, like all those old movies where the mad scientist rescued his single notebook from the flames. But his work and Frank Peron's was scattered in a thousand computer files, delicate microhardware, and intangible AI simulations. Everything was backed up, with duplicates stored in various vaults. It would be safe. For now, the important thing was to escape. The mob had already killed one of the guards; Jerry had no doubt they would tear him apart.

He ran down the hall as he heard footsteps in the lobby, shouted orders, another gunshot. Jerry fled to the back stairwell, yanked open the door, and leaped down the concrete stairs three at a time, balancing himself on the railing. At the bottom, he ripped off his lab coat and left it on the landing before emerging into the administrative section of the main building.

He peeked around the door. They had not gotten this far down the halls yet, and managerial offices would not be their first target. He heard a huge roaring explosion and saw through a set of windows the annex building erupt into orange flames. Impossible! This couldn't be happening! But ignorant peasants had always stormed the doctor's castle, carrying torches.

Jerry kept close to the wall as he hurried along. The front and side doors would be out of the question. But the back had an emergency exit, a crash-out door that would also activate alarms and notify the police and fire departments. He couldn't decide if that would be good or bad.

A window shattered in one of the suites in front of him, and a puddle of flames spilled from a broken bottle. Molotov cocktail; one of the front offices — either Ethan's or O'Hara's — burst into flame.

Jerry placed his ear to the emergency exit door. He heard chaos outside, but it sounded distant. He imagined somebody stationed back here with a rifle pointed at the door, waiting for him to come running. But he had no other choice.

Jerry used his back to slam out through the door, throwing himself to the ground as he emerged. He rolled, waiting to hear gunshots strike the

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door, ping off the asphalt, slam into his chest. What had Pancake felt when the bullets slammed into him? He didn't know how much damage his own body could endure and still repair itself. He had never tested his limits.

But the only gunshots came from the side of the building. He heard more shouts and running people. He got up and sprinted to the corner of the building. If only he could make it to the parking lot and to his car, he could crash through the fence and drive off, get Trish and the baby, and hide in a motel for a few days until this stuff calmed down.

He let himself feel a ripple of smugness. The violence here would stun the protest movement; once the public saw them do murder and destruction like this, all sympathy for their cause would be gone. This was like mass insanity. Killing people by blowing up abortion clinics never won any support for Pro-Life groups, did it? Armstrong's bomb hadn't helped the Vietnam War protest decades before, had it?

But when Jerry saw the people attacking the DyMar building, saw the weapons they carried and the uniform way they moved, he knew immediately that this was no mob, that this was no ragtag band of second-generation hippies yanking shotguns off their mantels.

Fire from the lower level spread through the main building. More burning bottles had been tossed through downstairs windows.

With a shock he noticed a complete absence of TV crews, though they had been covering the protest since its beginning. On the parking lot near the gate, Jerry saw the sprawled uniformed bodies of two security guards. The others were probably dead somewhere along the fence line — unless they were themselves part of the assault team.

In the confusion, Jerry added an angry expression to his face and ran among the mob, working his way to the parking lot. He slipped through, shouting directions to anyone who looked his way as if to challenge him.

Once Jerry got to the cars, he ducked low, working among them. This late at night, not many vehicles remained — only his own, the guards', a handful of other cars and trucks that had either been broken down, or sat with *For Sale* signs in their windshields.

He found Frank Peron's black sports car and hesitated. But Frank had left days ago! Unless he had never made it. Jerry swallowed a cold lump in his throat.

Once he got in his car, he would have to start it fast, and drive away

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fast, keeping his head low to avoid gunfire. Judging from what Pancake had endured, Jerry could survive some major injuries with his nanotech healing machines, but he had no desire to test them.

He reached the passenger side of his car and fished in his pocket for the key ring. Among the shouts and burning and gunshots, the noise he made was insignificant, but still the jingle seemed too loud to him. He unlocked the door and slipped in, crawling over the passenger seat and pulling the door shut behind him. Squirming, he positioned himself behind the steering wheel, still ducking low, and took an absurd moment to strap himself in with the seat belt. He would have to crash through the fence, and he did not want to smack his head on the dashboard and knock himself senseless.

Before starting the car, he plotted his route, found a side gate with an access road that would take him off to the highway. He switched off all the automatic-collision-avoidance systems, the laser-guidance options. He was going to have to drive like a stuntman. He made up his mind to plow right over anybody who stood in his way. This was life or death here. Adrenaline pounded through him. He would gain nothing by waiting.

He turned the key in the ignition.

The car bomb instantly blew him into pieces, trapping his body in the burning hulk of twisted metal. Not even his cell-repair machines could fix so much damage.

IN FRONT of Patrice's house, the man wasted no time as he ground the red vehicle to a halt. He left the engine purring, slid the door open, and stood up.

He brought a scattershot rifle out of the front seat and leveled it at Patrice. "Ding dong, Avon calling," he said.

Patrice stood defiantly on the porch, unable to move. She felt old and weak. When Judd stepped out and stood beside her, she felt weaker still.

"Or would you rather I said, 'I'm from the government; I'm here to help you'?" the man continued. He had a medium build and wore a red flannel shirt with white T-shirt poking up to his neck. His face was bland, nondescript, showing no indications of outright evil.

Without taking his eyes from them, he reached in to the dashboard of his truck and yanked out two sheets of paper, colored computer printouts

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showing faces. The images were split: one side showed a photograph of her from fifteen years before, and the other image — computer enhanced —had "aged" her to approximate what she looked like now, along with a detailed personality analysis suggesting how she might normally dress. The second sheet of paper showed baby Jody and a much-less-exact extrapolation of how he would look as a sixteen-year-old boy.

"I'm convinced," the man said. "Or are you going to deny it, Mrs. McKenzy?"

For a moment, all the words backed up in her mind. She couldn't think of anything to say, couldn't think of anything worth saying. "What do you want from us?"

"What do I want?" he laughed and stepped around the door of the vehicle, still pointing the scattershot at them. "Purity's been looking a long time. We've had solo agents combing the Northwest for two years looking for you. Full-blown assault teams ready to move in if we expect any trouble. You're lucky I found you first. I just wanted to be sure."

Growling, Pancake stood up and eased forward, baring his teeth. He stepped in front of Judd.

The Purity man stopped and blinked in astonishment. "Jesus, that's the dog! The goddamned dog — it's still alive! Well, well, well!"

"Do you want money?" Patrice said. She didn't have much left, but it would stall him for a few minutes. "I have cash. It won't show up on any account record."

"This goes beyond money," he said. "We need to bring you in. Take the dog and destroy him. Then find out from you and the boy if you've kept any of Dr. McKenzy's notes, maybe some of his nanotech samples. We can't take chances with the human race."

Seeming to sense the boy was the weak link in this scenario, the Purity man aimed the scattershot at Judd's head and took a few more steps toward them. Holding the rifle with one hand, he fumbled in his pocket, withdrawing a pair of polymer handcuffs.

"Now then, Mrs. McKenzy, let's not make this difficult. I want you to cuff one of these around your wrist and the other around the boy's ankle. That'll make it impossible for you to run anywhere." He extended the handcuffs forward.

Pancake lunged. Black Labradors were not normally used as attack dogs, but Pancake must have been able to sense the fear and tension in the

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air. He knew who the intruder was, and he had been with the same owner for twenty-four years.

He struck the Purity man full in the shoulders, startling him, spoiling his aim. The scattershot dropped. The man's finger squeezed the trigger. The explosion roared through the quiet isolation far from the main road.

Instead of taking off Judd's head, the swath of silver needles spattered across the boy's chest, spraying blood behind him to the walls of the house.

Patrice screamed.

Pancake bore the man to the ground. The man thumped into the front of his vehicle, banged against the sharp laser-guidance detectors, and then sprawled. He tried to fight the dog off. Pancake bit at his face, his throat.

Wailing, Patrice dropped to her knees and cradled her son's head. "Oh my God! Oh my God!"

Judd blinked his eyes. They were wide with astonishment and seemingly far away. Blood bubbled out of his mouth, and he spat it aside. "So tired." She stroked his hair.

Pancake backed away from the motionless man on the ground. Blood lay in pools from the man's torn throat.

The headlights of Patrice's carryall glared up from the wet pavement long after dark. She had switched off the old and unreliable laser-guidance systems and drove faster than safety or common sense allowed, but panic had gotten into her mind now. She kept driving, pushing her foot to the floor and wrestling with the curves of the coast road, heading north. Dark pine trees flashed by like tunnel walls on either side of her.

She had to find someplace else, to run again, to start a new life.

Pancake rested in the back of the station wagon, exhausted. Clumps of blood bristled from his fur. She hadn't taken time to clean him up. She had paused only long enough to throw all of her ready cash into the glove compartment. The Purity man's own wallet had held two hundred dollars and several cred cards under different names.

Looking down at the man's body in the falling dusk light, she noticed that the blood had stopped flowing, yet his heart continued to beat. He looked to be in a deep sleep, and his skin felt warm and feverish. She stepped back in horror. Of course the government had nanotech healers of their own! All of Jerry's records were supposedly destroyed in the DyMar

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Labs disaster, but with backups and disjointed systems, no simple fire could have eliminated everything.

Now she knew why, after all these years, others had not made similar breakthroughs. Jerry had been merely the first, but other researchers were close on his heels. The sham organization of Purity, or the government, or some worldwide power consortium had kept nanotechnology to themselves, blocking or absorbing all other breakthroughs as they occurred. It would have changed the world — but they would never let it out.

This man would wake up in a day or so, and report back to his superiors. She could destroy him now, set his body on fire or squash his head with the front wheel of his own vehicle.

Instead, she siphoned all the fuel out of his truck and switched license markers. In some coast town, she would find a darkened parking lot and other unattended vehicles, and she would switch markers again. Then she would move on.

In the back seat of the carryall, Judd lay in silence, wrapped in two bloodstained blankets she had torn from the beds upstairs. His pulse was faint, his breathing shallow, but he still lived. He seemed to be in a coma.

The obstacle alarm screeched. From the trees on her right, a dog stepped into the road in front of her.

Patrice cried out, slammed the brakes, and yanked the steering wheel. The dog bounded back out of sight. She swerved, nearly lost control of the car on the slick road, then regained it. Behind her, in the rear view mirror, she saw the dark shape of the dog walk back across the road, undaunted by its close call.

She remembered one of the last conversations she had had with Jerry, after he had finally told her what he had done to Pancake and the immortality his nanotechnology had brought. Jerry had wanted to give her the same type of protection.

She blinked at him in horror when he told her he had already done it to himself. He wanted to do it to her, too.

The thought of a billion billion tiny machines crawling through her body, checking and rechecking her cell structures, seemed abominable to her. She refused to let him. Jerry would not let her ponder the question, would not let her come to grips with the idea. He wanted an answer *right then*. That was just the way Jerry McKenzy did things.

Baby Jody started to cry, awakened by their raised voices. Trish had

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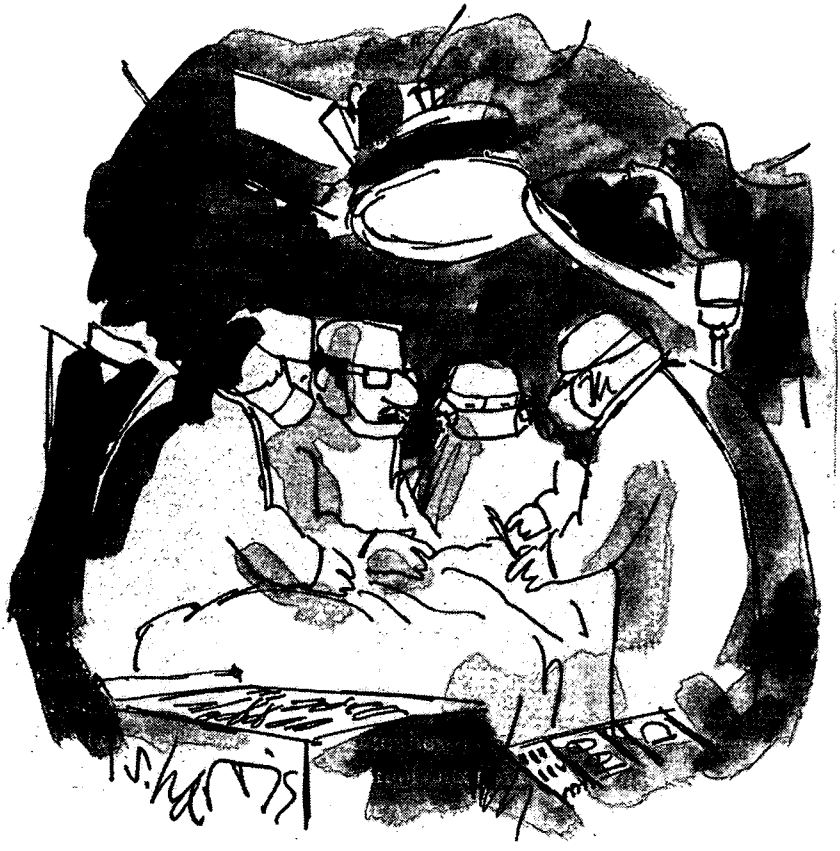
looked up at her husband with wide eyes; she caught a faint smile on his face as Jerry glanced toward Jody's room.

"You didn't do anything to the baby, did you! What did you do to Jody?"

"Nothing!" Jerry said. He smiled. "I didn't do anything."

But she could always tell when her husband was lying.

As she drove off into the night, with her son's bleeding body in the car seat behind her, Patrice prayed she was right.



"Complications. Between the large intestine and the small intestine there seems to be a medium-sized intestine."

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Solo, Robert Mason, Putnam, $21.95

Time and Again, Clifford D. Simak, Collier, $9.00

ROBERT MASON'S most recent previous book was *Chickenhawk*, a memoir about his time in Vietnam. That is, according to the front cover of this book, that's true. But according to the back cover, it was *Weapon*, a novel about a human-configuration experimental robot named Solo, who went either very wrong or very right depending on who you listen to. And *Solo* is the sequel.

What I'm really saying is that Putnam's is not publishing this as a science fiction novel. In truth, they don't know what they're publishing it as. If it was intended as science fiction, of course, it would be a Berkeley Book. But one of the reviewers' quotes is from Joe Haldeman — identified as a Hugo and Nebula winner, but whose Viet Nam novel they forget to mention — and another is by me, specifically indentified as coming from *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. But *Chickenhawk* is the only other book by Robert Mason — and its title is in pretty big type — mentioned on the front cover.

Why do I go on about this? Because I am convinced that you can sell a book as one kind of thing, not as two or three different things. I *think* the result will be that the straight media won't quite know what to do with this book. I think the majority of bookstores won't quite know whether to display this book in the front or the back of the store. *Maybe* it will sell to the straight market after all; they do refer to it as a technothriller in the flap copy. But they refer to it as a half a dozen other things as well. And I think it's a little too far over the line; I think, in other words, that it's undeniably science fiction. Good science fiction. Good — not, unlike *Weapon*, great.

Of course, it is a Book-of-The-Month club alternate, and a Quality Paperback Book Club alternate. That should give it a leg up. [I have

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no information on a paperback edition, if you were wondering; I have the feeling the only way you can get one is as a member of said Book Club, until the mass-market paperback eventually comes out.)

At any rate, here is this book —with a note of thanks to Marvin Minsky, Ron Oliver and Larry Hunter, among others including good friend Joe Haldeman — and we are assured by Putnam's publicist that Mason really believes that a creature like his Solo is possible in the foreseeable future. And I suppose it is. But Mason's and my belief does not matter. Mason's is cited as yet another piece of ammunition for calling this a techno-thriller rather than science fiction, and if Putnam's publicist happens to share his belief, that is irrelevant. The ammunition has been fired in any case.

The fact that *I* believe it is another matter. But that doesn't prevent this book from being science fiction, so my opinion on the *actual* merits of Mason's technology is also irrelevant . . . as is Mason's, you realize.

So let us . . . after this terminable introduction . . . deal with Mason the fiction author and his piece of suppositional technology.

Solo — as you may remember from my laudatory review, or as you may not — was an experimental soldier which, unlike computers, had to be educated. The reason it had to be educated was because it possessed an artificial intelligence, so it could make decisions on its own in a battle. This was the only mode that would work. A simple plug-in *tabula rasa* would mean it would do exactly what it was programmed to do — get to its feet, proceed a meter and a half in a forward direction at a measured pace, raise its weapon, aim in a predetermined direction — in short, fail miserably. This distinction failed to occur to various military types, and the result was they kept trying to get Solo to react like a plug-in program module, when in reality he was something else entirely.

This meant his creator was branded as a traitor, or something close to it, when he recommended abandoning the project. This meant Solo was airlifted to Central America as a trial; it meant he promptly disappeared and was next seen adopting a village of peasants who were good to him, never mind the fact that they were technically Sandinistas. And so forth. *Weapon* is a very good book, not only for its depiction of how an artificial intelligence with human and superhuman mobility would function but for its very effective human touches . . . including Solo groping

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close to being in love. (It is possible, if you don't press your luck.) In the end, Solo has to disappear, which he does by faking his death convincingly, and the book draws to a close, very well.

But not well enough to prevent a sequel. *Solo*, with which we are concerned here, was planned all along. For instance, Nimrod — a duplicate Solo, only better — was mentioned in the earlier book, undergoing the same process of education that Solo went through.

Well, in this book he is ready. Like Solo, the fact that he is educated does not mean he is in quite the same universe as the rest of us. Solo, for instance, was told we won the Vietnam war. Nimrod is given pain, from a control box, whenever he does something inappropriate (because his tutors did not foresee the results of one or another instruction, but Nimrod gets the pain anyway). This drives him crazy, but his instructors don't quite realize what that means.

He is given the mission of tracking down Solo and killing him, once his masters realize Solo is still alive. But he does not quite do that.

Solo, meanwhile, has taken up with a bag lady in New York City. And that leads to a number of adventures, reasonably thrilling, plus, eventually, a climactic scene with Nimrod and Solo locked in combat, and a human team of weapon-wielders who bring Solo down. Not out, as it happens, but definitely down. And the book ends.

I cannot put my finger on why this is not as good a book as *Weapon*. I think it may have something to do with the fact that Solo has moved to an urban environment. This probably seemed like a good idea, but the fact is that creatures like Solo are more easily understandable in relatively uncomplicated terrain.

It may also have something to do with the bag lady. Laura is not quite believable; there is too much coincidence and too much that we have to accept about her.

I think though that the real trouble comes when Solo wipes out the SWAT team. It's the first time, in either book, that he kills blameless people on stage. (He did kill his first trainer, in *Weapon*, but offstage.) It's one thing to wipe out a whole parcel of Contras. It's another thing to kill people who are just doing what they were trained to do.

Granted, Solo is not human, and Mason may well have intended to make the point that although Solo is the hero of the book, he *is* not human. I'm not sure most readers will quite be able to sustain quite the same amount of sympathy for him after that. And if they can't sustain the sympathy, then this be-

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comes a horror novel — but not enough of a horror novel, and in any case athwart Mason's intention.

The idea of educating Nimrod through pain is interesting — it's done by neurological means — but I wonder if it could become the method of choice. It seems to me someone would quickly figure out that your AI would give top priority to finding a means to escape it, with everything else not as important. Whatever your AI gives top priority to had better be in full accord with *your* wishes. And of course this would instead be directly contrary to them.

Well, that's as may be. "I read *Solo* straight through in one four-hour sitting," Joe Haldeman says. Well, yes, especially since Mason is a friend of his and he participated to some extent in the writing thereof. In fact, the book is, as I said, a good read. But not a great one.

You don't remember. Chances are you weren't even born. But in 1950 a magazine appeared on the stands called *Galaxy*, and the hegemony of *Astounding*, which had been the unquestioned leader since about 1939, was broken forever. *F&SF* was a year or so older, and has lasted longer — for that matter, has lasted longer than *Astounding*'s title, which changed to *Analog* a good long time ago — but *F&SF* was not ever a direct rival of *Astounding*'s. *Galaxy* was.

God knows what *Galaxy*'s actual intentions were. Horace Gold was the editor in the beginning, with very strong support from Frederik Pohl who, as the pre-eminent literary agent of that day, not only shuttled manuscripts into *Galaxy* that would have gone to *Astounding* in other circumstances but also, at first with Cyril Kornbluth and later alone after Cyril died, supplied novels *Astounding* would never have gotten, because they wouldn't have been written.

God knows — as I said, again — what Horace's original intentions were. I think, and so do some other people, that he wanted a magazine that would stand beside *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, but in science fiction rather than general slick fiction. What we saw, however, was a magazine whose physical package was roughly like *Astounding*'s, but worse, whose artwork was at least as bad, and which contained, in the early issues, some of the best science fiction written up to that time.

This was in part the fault of John W. Campbell, *Astounding*'s editor, who had succeeded in alienating so many of his writers that when *Galaxy* picked them up it automatically obtained many of the best-known bylines. And with excellent work. If Horace had stuck

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to the general *gestalt* of the first twelve or twenty-four issues, it would have been no contest at all.

But things change, and in due course Fred became editor, and *Galaxy* for a time became without question the best magazine in the field. But by then the sense of immediacy was past; what was dramatic about the first couple of years of *Galaxy* was the sharp, immediate challenge to the way things had been for ten or more years in the field.

I don't suppose many of you remember *Time and Again*, either. But it was the first serial *Galaxy* ever ran, and while much larger names waited in the wings, it was by Clifford D. Simak. That was a bit of a stunner.

It came out in the first issue of *Galaxy*, and it got very little help. The cover was an early attempt at continuous-tone reproduction, rather than the familiar little doughnuts of color superimposed one on the other, and it was without a doubt the worst cover ever put on a major magazine, not only for the quality of its color reproduction but because it was almost entirely static. Then, the lead interior illustration was split across two pages, and one of the splits was upside down. (It probably wouldn't have helped much for it to be right side up; one can see why a rushed art director wouldn't have noticed. [Although one soon grew tired of making excuses for W. I. Van der Poel.])

Clifford D. Simak was the most charming of John W. Campbell's writers. He had written the short stories that were to become the *City* series over a period of wartime years while working a day job as city editor of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, and one of the reasons he wasn't drafted was because he had been contributing to *Astounding* before John Campbell became editor. He was, in other words, already an old writer. And he was a very bad writer at one time, authoring *The Cosmic Engineers* which was, believe me, a very bad book indeed.

But Campbell had seen something in him, or he had seen something in Campbell, and bit by bit he hauled himself up by his bootstraps in a truly heroic effort. And in due course he was writing short stories like "Desertion," than which there is not much better in the entire Modern Science Fiction canon of blessed memory.

But the first novel in *Galaxy*? Come, now.

Well, I've got news for you. (A) the book held up beautifully in its first publication. It did the job of hooking and holding readers to the serial, as, indeed, it was to go on to do in various book editions in the

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fifties and sixties. (B) it is the best single volume of Clifford D. Simak's usually long and distinguished career, and that is, when you add it up, saying a very great deal. And (C) I urge it upon you today, in its classy new trade paperback edition.

It is the story of Asher Sutton, starship pilot, who crashes on an unknown planet. And who is rescued by an enigmatic race. And who, through a series of splits in reality, finds himself the author of not one religion but of multiple warring schisms in that religion. And it is terrific.

You will find in it foreshadowings of *Stranger in A Strange Land* and of several other novels by names more famous. You will find some other things that will astonish you when you think of when they were written. But most of all you will find in it Clifford D. Simak.

Now, you may not have heard of this man; it is, after all, some time since he died, and the water closes over our heads quickly. But he did hold the Nebula Grand Master Award, if that means anything to you, before he died. Much more important, there wasn't an evil bone in his body, and it shows in his work. He was an ornament to the field, and never more so than with *Time and Again*. Go read it.

I did not know, when I wrote it, that my review of Isaac's *Asimov Laughs Again* would not be read by him. It was, as a matter of fact, based on my obituary of him for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, but that was just written to be kept on file. I honestly thought the *Sun-Times* was being rather premature, and it was a shock when it was not.

I had known Isaac Asimov for quite a while. My single favorite memory of him was of the night, when he was still a young man, that he excused himself from my wife's and my table, disappeared downstairs in the men's room, and came bounding back up a few minutes later, shouting "I passed it! I passed it!" referring, it turned out, to the kidney stone that had plagued him throughout his delivery of the guest of honor speech at that convention.

You had to be there. But somehow, I expected him to keep pulling that rabbit out of his hat, so to speak — to react to every adversity that Mother Nature could throw at him with a glad cry of "I passed it!"

We will all miss him, of course. And I would be presumptuous to assume that I will miss him any more than someone else would. But there were fewer of us when Isaac was yet young — and I was yet younger — and the memories are perhaps . . . Well, no. No, loss is not quantifiable.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter, Sharyn McCrumb, (Scribner's, cloth, 306pp, $19.00); *If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O* (Ballantine, paper, 263pp, $4.99)

SHARYN McCRUMB proved her awareness of science fiction — or at least its social aspects — with her Edgar-winning first novel, *Bimbos of the Death Sun*. But with *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* she moves into the company of contemporary fantasy and immediately proves that she belongs in the front rank, with Lindholm, de Lint, and McCammon — with a jaunty salute to the late Manly Wade Wellman.

This novel is not marketed as fantasy, however, so it will be easy to overlook. Because McCrumb's readers expect to find her in the mystery category, that's where this book has been placed. And it's not a bad decision, considering that it is set in the eastern Tennessee mountain town of Hamelin that was the setting of her fine mystery novel *If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O*.

There is no genre confusion about *Peggy-O*. There's not a speck of fantasy in it, as Sheriff Spencer Arrowood, a lonely hometown boy, tries to find out who is making death threats against the faded 60s folksinger Peggy Muryan, who has just moved to Hamelin. But *Peggy-O* also established that McCrumb is at least as interested in character and current moral issues as she is in mystery — perhaps more. For *Peggy-O* is also a novel about the reverberations of the Vietnam War in the consciences and memories of those who survived that era. Spencer Arrowood lost a resented older brother there, and is sure his mother wishes it had been football hero Cal who lived to adulthood. Arrowood's deputy, LeDonne, is a vet with flashbacks to the war, as is one of the prime suspects; many others have been touched by the war, since this was a part of the country where college deferments weren't exactly thick on the ground, and people felt it was their duty to serve.

Peggy Muryan herself is nursing

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an old guilt — when the record company noticed her folk-singing duo, they wanted only her, and for the sake of fame and fortune she dropped her partner and one-time fiancé, Travis Perdue. Travis ended up in Air Force intelligence in Vietnam, writing ever-more-bitter letters to her until he turned up missing in action. Now the threats she's getting point to Travis as her would-be murderer.

The odd thing is that nobody actually solves the mystery, though everything becomes absolutely clear by the end. Finding out the identity of the perpetrator is simply not the central issue in *Peggy-O*. Nor is it all that important in *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, where the truth about the grisly family murder-suicide at the beginning of the novel is known to two of the main characters all along, and they simply don't tell anybody until the end. It is a token of McCrumb's amazing talent that she uses one of these people as a viewpoint charactter and yet it is *not* cheating when that viewpoint does not give us the truth until after a crisis is at the end.

Has McCrumb simply discovered a new formula? If so, I love it; let's jot it down, fellow writers, and learn from it:

In both books, there is a contemporary issue that is affecting the lives of many of the people in Hamelin — in *Peggy-O*, the issue is Vietnam; in *Hangman's*, industrial pollution.

In both books, the main character is dealing with a crisis of identity and relationship which is resolved by the end of the book, though in a surprising way — in *Peggy-O*, the transformed character is Arrowood; in *Hangman's*, a minister's wife who is forced to fill in for some of her husband's duties as he is away serving with the military in the Gulf War.

In both books, we are immersed in the society of a small Appalachian town, seeing the rest of America through that lens.

In both books, there are many major characters whose attitudes and actions influence the events of the story, so that you can't remove any of them without damaging the whole fabric.

However, I don't think what I've been describing is a formula. I think what I've described is rich, masterful storytelling — easily accessible to any reader, with no needless furbelows for the sake of "art"; as thick and ripe and sharp as perfect fruit.

Best of all, with *Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, McCrumb shows that nothing is lost and much is gained when the realistic town of Hamelin is given a vein of magic in the form of Nora Bonesteel, an old

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woman in a mountain cabin who somehow knows when bad things are going to happen to the people of the county. She knew, for instance, that the Underhill family was going to suffer a terrible disaster; she sewed a quilt for them with six coffins, and felt a need to put four of them in a graveyard. Sure enough, the parents and the youngest boy were brutally murdered, seemingly by the oldest son, Josh, who then proceeded to blow his own brains out. The two surviving children, Maggie and Mark, were away at a play practice at the high school, and one of them will also die before the story ends.

For all of Nora's foreknowledge, she freely admits that she never has been told a thing that she wanted to know; and yet not all the things she knows are bad. Laura Bruce, the minister's wife, comes to see her not only a harbinger of bad news, but also a teacher of hope, and the magic provides a sense of purpose in a world in which terrible things can happen. With the flood that rages at the end of the book and the war providing a steady undercurrent throughout it, the world of nature and the world of humanity both do their worst, and yet the strong survive and the good remain a blessing in the lives of others.

McCrumb has not left genre behind with this book, but rather has gathered many genres together to use the gifts that each provides. Mystery gives her the power to bring a new explanation into the end of the book that revises our understanding of all that went before; fantasy provides a sense of purpose and meaning; and her powerful use of the techniques of the character novel makes us love these people as they struggle upward, if not toward the light, then toward dry land. This is a novel of hunger, love, and death, and that includes all genres, all myths, all styles, all publics.

I read these books out of order, by the way, *Hangman's* before *Peggy-O*. I lost nothing in the process — each book is completely self-contained. More important, each book is the kind of tale that demands that you immediately share it with everyone that you care about. Now I've told you about it, and if you read it, we'll both have within us the true, bright memories McCrumb has made for us.

City of Truth, James Morrow, (St. Martin's, cloth, 104pp, $14.95)

Morrow is a satirist, and a good one. his vision is piercing, and he shows us his view of the world through a cold, hard lens. The only softness comes from laughter, and the only laughter comes from the pain of self-recognition. However,

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until this book I thought of Morrow much the way I think of David Letterman, as one who is willing to ridicule anything and everything except himself. Oh, yes, both Letterman and Morrow *seem* to lay themselves on the artificial construct. They never expose what they care about, and therefore all that is vulnerable about them remains hidden away and untouched.

A few times, Letterman has shown his real, breakable self — but always by accident. With *City of Truth*, I think Morrow has done it on purpose. And it is at once the downfall and the salvation of this book.

To start with, though, you must understand that *City of Truth* is first-rate, funny satire from beginning to end. The premise is that our society, fed up with deception, has voluntarily submitted to a program of conditioning that makes it impossible for us to tell lies. Not even little white lies. Not even advertising hype. Thus you buy ice cream from the No Great Shakes company, one of the morning TV shows is *Enduring Another Day*, the Assistant Secretary of Imperialism is one of our government officials, the police are called the "brutality squad," a recorded message from the phone company says, "The number you have reached is out of service. Probably an unpaid bill. We're pretty quick to disconnect in such cases," and people send each other birthday cards that say things like: "Roses drop dead,/ Violets do too,/ with each day life gets shorter, / Happy birthday to you."

If you don't think that's funny, then I hope I'm never stuck sitting next to you at dinner.

Funny . . . but also superior. Sneering. Distant. The rhetorical stance of one who is above it all. Fun for a couple of hours, but not a vision that you can actually live with.

Which is fine. Morrow tends to write short works, and they are always fun or at least intelligent most of the way through; who could ask for anything more?

Apparently, Morrow can. Because in this book he also seems to be laying himself on the table before us, just for a moment, just a few glimpses, but he is there. *Not above it all. Not* untouchable.

It isn't the fact that his hero is coping with the coming death of his beloved son from a fatal disease. Morrow has always worked with visceral tools — he knows that satire is worthless if it does not pull at our vitals.

The difference here is that Morrow lets us see that the story also pulls at *his* vitals. He actually lets us see what he believes. He actually leaves himself in the posi-

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tion of letting us see that he wants this story to move us.

Oh, he apologizes for it a bit, here and there. For instance, he can't quite deal with the fact that he has written a tear-jerker scene, and so he has his narrator cutely say that he "did the tear thing" instead of just saying that he cried (or, as those who are more practiced in the art of sentiment would have known, never have him speak directly of crying at all). And in the moments of genuine emotion, the writing is not as clever as Morrow's writing usually is. He is even a bit clumsy here and there. But it doesn't feel like artifice. It feels as though he means it. And so, for the first time in reading a satirical work by Morrow, I don't feel dirty at the end of it, as though I had just betrayed my friends by laughing when some clever snob made fun at them. Instead I feel oddly cleansed.

So if you're one of those who has never felt a moment's discomfort reading Morrow, then this book might disappoint you, because the loftiness is not unrelenting and the nastiness is not pure. But for those of you who, after all the pulling of rugs out from under our pretensions, would like your satirist then to show you where he thinks it's safe to stand, *City of Truth* will do rather well. You will begin the book by reading passages aloud; you will end it, I think, in quiet communion with another soul. Not a bad course for a story to follow.

Jennifer Murdley's Toad Bruce Coville, ill. Garry A. Lippincott (HBJ, cloth, 156pp $16.95

OK, *Jennifer Murdley's Toad* starts the way teen novels are supposed to start. Misfit girl is teased by other kids because she'd beyond plain, she's seriously ugly. You know her parents love her, because when her father came in and found her crying because another TV ad was selling "beautiful" dolls and "beautiful" girls, her broke the screen. Yet his very anger was also a confirmation that she *is* as ugly as she feared.

Ugly, but tough. And when she pops into a not-very-surprising magic shop, she feels an immediate kinship with — and loathing for — the uglier animals confined in cages there.

The magic shopkeeper gives her a toad for an absurdly low price, because she is "supposed" to have it. When she gets out of the store, it turns out to be a talking toad. But not a prince in disguise. He has been a toad all along and is perfectly content with it, provided that she offers him reasonable accommodations.

It is now, past the magic shop, past the few words of the talking

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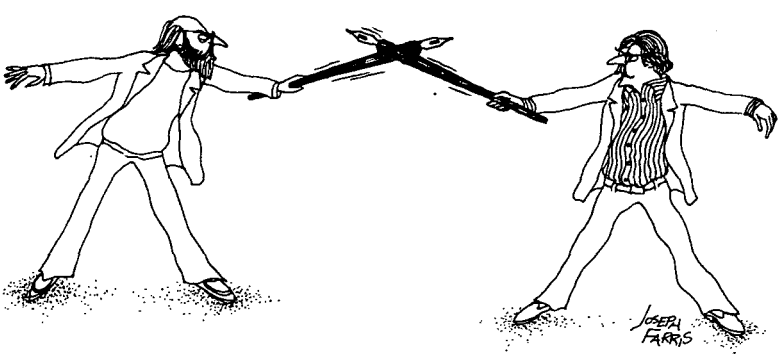
toad, that Coville begins to take us into wonderful new places. The toad not only talks, you see, but is also a superb mimic. Which means that when Jennifer Murdley's worst enemy, Sara, manages to annoy him, he wreaks his vengeance by imitating the sound of the principal speaking over the loudspeaker in class, calling Sara to the office because she is in serious trouble. Ah, the delicious humiliation.

That's just the beginning. There *is* a rather unexpected effect when you kiss this toad, or it kisses you; the saga of his, er, birth is both familiar and wonderfully fresh; and the whole thing wraps up in a wonderful contest between a very bad woman and a very bufine Jennifer Murdley.

How good is this young adult fantasy? Let's just say that it passed the Emily Test with flying colors. Emily is my 11-year-old, and she not only read it without stopping, but also burst out laughing and had to tell us about funny bits not once but many times. And when it was done, she said, "Dad, it's a *great* book."

It's good news that even though the story definitely ends, it also leaves room for more Jennifer Murdley stories in the future. And in the meantime, folks, you gotta get a load of this toad.



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This is a busy year for James Sallis. His novel, The Long-Legged Fly, *has just appeared from Carroll and Graf. At the end of the year, Dalkey Archive will publish his translation of Raymond Queneau's novel,* Saint Glinglin. *He has short fiction and poetry appearing in* The Chariton Review, Pequod, *and* The American Poetry Review. *He has also edited an issue of* The Review of Contemporary Fiction *devoted to the work of Samuel R. Delany.*

"Ansley's Demons" shows Jim's range, and adds a touch of dark fantasy to this issue.

Ansley's Demons

By James Sallis

SOMEHOW, INSTINCTIVELY, he knew not to open his eyes, knew that it would end if he did. The touch of those lips lightly and so familiar against his own — and when, again instinctively, he reached up and around, his hand remembered the long curve of her back. For it *was* her: he did not question that.

And somehow she moved within him as well as upon him. Though he felt nothing beneath it, though he did not will this, one hand, then the other, rose into air above him and cupped themselves where breasts would be.

"Ansley," he said.

Outside his window a tidelike wind tugged momentarily at the edge of the house. Across the room close to the floor, a light breeze scuttled, lifting a page of the newspaper lying there, briefly disturbing the leaves of a plant she'd given him on a birthday — hers, not his.

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Shhhh, the wind told him.

That was a Monday, and she was gone almost as soon as he realized she was there with him. Tears spilled down the side of his face onto ears and pillow, and his penis throbbed, half-erect, above him. For a moment then, wind howled, and it was like the howling of his own bereft soul.

She returned on Thursday, but left almost as soon. He lay for a long time afterward, watching lights from cars outside fall across the ceiling; he lay there probing at his memories as one unpacks luggage, small and much-used things on top and in odd corners, more substantial belongings farther down; then turned and found her again in his sleep.

Sunday she stayed, even afterward, as he settled back breathless and limp onto the bedding. He stretched out his arm, and memory, or the moment, was so strong that he imagined he almost felt her shoulder in the palm of his hand.

"How . . . ?" he said.

There was no wind. Or only the small one of her breath in his ear where she lay against him.

That December, it was unseasonably, impossibly warm, closer to Mississippi Delta autumns than to any Massachusetts winter he'd ever known. Even the birds seemed confused. They'd wheel off into a morning sky in great sweeping waves and disappear, then, late the same day, be back, chittering and thrashing about, in their accustomed trees.

Those same mornings he fell into the habit of passing his time at a park across town, an oblong block of halfhearted shrubs and bright yellow benches perched at city's edge over a twin abyss of suburb and barrio. He'd sit there watching children dash towards school, their parents plummet to the shopping malls and office complexes where they worked, and he'd think about ambition: what was it like to have it? A phrase he'd picked up somewhere in his reading, *wandering to find direction*, rolled about in his head like a barrel broken loose in the ship's hold. But he didn't want direction. If anyone had asked (though no one did, of course), he would have answered that he didn't want anything.

A woman of twenty or so with long black hair and round glasses, black sweater, yellow tennis shoes was there some days, and gradually they began to nod, to acknowledge one another. Usually she carried a book,

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other times a bag filled with papers and composition books. Like himself, she was always alone.

The birds had a fondness for cheese popcorn, and often he stopped at a party-goods store on the way to the park to buy a bag. One morning he looked up from the cluster at his feet (sparrows, wrens, lackluster blue-green pigeons shunning a single albino one) to see her on the opposite bench. Her head came up from her book just then, too, and she smiled. After a moment he walked over and sat beside her. Most of the flock of birds followed.

"Want to help feed them?" He held out the bag.

"Well, actually," she said, "I keep coming here hoping they might feed me."

"And have they?"

She closed the book on one finger and held it against her leg.

"We don't always know right away. Other things, we *do* know, from the first."

He reached over and pivoted the book: *The Surrealist Moment.*

"You're an artist?"

"Art historian. Final refuge for those who love it and can't do it. I tried. Perspective might as well have been Greek; colors swam away from me. But all my life, ever since I can remember, I loved history, too. I read history textbooks the way other kids did comics, starting when I was only nine or ten. I think at one time I may have known everything there was to know about the antebellum South. Then I discovered Matisse, Bonnard, Delvaux . . . ."

"And you teach — I've seen you with papers."

She nodded. "Art appreciation at the community college. Part-time and substitute at the university. That's the best I could find. Oh, and I do occasional reviews for the *Telegram.*"

"I may have seen your name, then."

"If so, you'd probably remember it. I never, ever, felt like an Ann, or a Barbara, which were the names my parents gave me. So when I went off to school, I made up a name I *did* like, and had everyone call me that. I've been Ansley ever since. Ansley Devereaux."

"French?"

"Cajun, yes. From a little town nearer Baton Rouge than any other place you've ever heard of, where half the store signs were in English, half

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in French, and all were misspelled."

"You're a long way from home, Ansley."

"Aren't we all."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess we are."

He scattered the rest of the popcorn and watched the birds scatter with it. They came back to his feet and waited awhile, then, one by one, flew away.

"Would you like some coffee?" he asked.

"That would be good." She put the book away and slipped her arm though the purse's shoulder strap. "But what I'd really like is to spend the afternoon with you."

A bird dropped from one of the trees, shot by just over their heads, and wheeled away again, pursued by another. Ansley looked down at the caterpillar the bird had dropped in her lap. It moved tentatively, just the front of it, exploring this new, sudden environment.

"See?" she said.

THAT THERE was great evil in the world, evil requiring only the smallest slip hole, an opening, he had never doubted; in their second year together, a piece of that evil detached itself and walked beside them.

After a flurry of short-term jobs, he'd gone to work for the paper, floating steadily upwards from writing bridal news to handling department rewrites to doing layout for the life-styles section. She had helped at first, on that, but both soon realized that he had the greater knack for it; had, in fact, something of a gift.

About April she began a long seige of illness: initially nausea and cramps, which they thought (with a strange mixture of alarm and elation) meant she was pregnant; then a series of colds and respiratory infections leading to hospitalization for pneumonia; and above it all, hovering there, an inexorable weakness, her ever-increasing sense of malaise, helplessness, surrender.

Then, just as suddenly and fiercely as they had begun, the symptoms subsided — only to return six weeks later.

Again the hospital, where, after days of blood tests, special procedures in closet-sized rooms, a rain of lengthy, incomprehensible explanations and acronyms (CT, ABG, MRI), they had a name for the evil that had attached itself to them.

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Lupus.

She woke that night near dawn. He felt her presence and turned from the window, where he sat watching cars climb across the city's concrete horizons. They were on the eighth floor of a building called Hope Memorial.

"How do you feel?"

"Not so good. You get any sleep?"

"A little."

"I told you you should go on home."

"Home is wherever you are."

"You know," she said, "you've always had a habit of saying the right thing, even when you made a fool of yourself."

"But one of my endearing traits."

"Oh yeah? You got a list of the others?"

"I'll get back to you."

"Right."

He walked over and sat beside her on the narrow bed, took her hand in his. In coming months, seige after seige, hospitalization after hospitalization, he would watch flesh fade from that hand as he held it, watch it withdraw imperceptibly until the hand was little more than a glove of parchment draped over bone.

She turned toward him, and the gown fell away from her breast. He resisted an impulse to put his other hand there. Dawn pried at the horizon. Time has the best gig going, he thought: it passes so successfully, whatever goes on in our lives.

"I always knew something was wrong," she said, "even as a child. I never spoke about it — I was afraid that somehow the words might make it more real, I guess — but I knew. I was different."

In coming months they would speak of many things they had not before, and most they had. Ice, then birds attempting to nest, appeared in the windows of rooms they occupied. Toward the end, too weak perhaps, her failing energies focused on passage (or on holding it off from her), she spoke hardly at all.

Near another dawn, he woke to his name on her breath, uncertain in that still blue room whether she had actually spoken or he had imagined it. Her breath was the barest pulse, and all light was gone behind her eyes, but as he leaned above her, his name formed again on her lips and balanced on a brief column of air.

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"This is forever," she told him then. "I hope you know that."

All that is best of dark and light, he'd think often in the following months. Then, inevitably: Fuck you, Byron, and the simpering romantic horse you rode in on. For the territory in which he found himself could be understood (if at all) only by a Poe, a Baudelaire.

She came to him that first time — somehow, instinctively, he knew not to open his eyes, knew that it would end if he did, knew it was her —almost six months afterward, when grief had shrunk to a hot black pearl deep inside, and, it seemed, might pass.

She came that Monday, then Thursday, Sunday, another Monday. Then, for a week or more, every night — and, as suddenly, was gone. He waited, tumescent at the merest hush of wind, thinking each moment that the creak and sway of wires outside his window in the wind might become more.

His grief, his loss, had seemed unendurable, and then, with her second departure, *was.*

Eventually friends came to the apartment and found him there, all but speechless, in a litter of fast-food cartons, discarded clothing, and offal. They took him to Hope Memorial, where one hour a day of group therapy and sixteen hours of Jeannie, Hazel, Lucy, and the Munsters pulled him back into focus.

His pain, he thought then, was a river gone underground.

But time blunts even the sharpest teeth. Slowly, the days he stalked with forms, going about them woodenly and at some distance — rising at six; ceremonial shower; conventional breakfast; hard, steady work; good dinner — began to take on substance, and feelings filtered in through the curtains. At dinner one night with the friends who had helped him, an hour or so into the meal, he suddenly realized that he had become again participant and not observer; that for some time now, he had been enjoying himself. It was a revelation.

Anne, he met a few nights later, she leaving La Madeleine, he entering, their coats brushing against one another, leather on leather, among close-set tables. Whenever there's a collision, even with no damage done, you're supposed to exchange numbers, he told her. And called her the next day for lunch (which she couldn't make), then for dinner (which she could, barely, in the space before a scheduled concert with friends at which she never arrived).

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Conversation embraced childhoods, work, the dew, popcorn and carrots, the inexhaustible process by which we become our parents.

They had coffee at a downtown diner at one in the morning, sandwiches at a highway truck stop at six. Leaden, indigestible doughnuts and more coffee at ten.

After that, they began spending all their free time together, each day retracing those same improvised routes to the interior, to the heart of their new content and continent.

Things moved slowly through hour-long back rubs, languorous walks taking in most of the city, encyclopedias of talk. She had been "mostly alone" for two years or more; they were so different after all; she was afraid. What surprised *him*, what astonished him one Tuesday morning when it tumbled into his head, something he'd known for some time, known from the first and never acknowledged, was that he was *not* afraid.

Sometimes that old despair licked at him in odd moments and sent chills stamping up his spine; he saw himself again in that solitary room, surrounded by sacks of half-eaten food and his own waste. But more often he looked away from that — to mornings and years when he and Anne sat together over coffee and Sunday papers at La Madeleine, where they walked along the gentle curve of a river as evening shelled the sky, or sat side by side in a circle of light with wind and the dark amoan outside.

He rarely thought of Ansley now, until one night he looked up and, for a moment, saw her face there above him. But then it was Anne's again, framed in a fall of red hair, familiar, endearing, constant.

Afterward he tried, in his mind, to bring back that face, and could not. One eye, a foothill of cheek and lip, would come into focus, then (when he moved on to retrieve some other portion) blur, dissolve, flow away. His mind lunged back into their time together, his and Ansley's — that slow, early awakening, the easy accommodations as they grew to know one another and respond at levels words could not penetrate, the twilight thickening between them in all those faceless rooms — then, with a massive thrust of will, he shut that door forever.

Memory, he thought, is a demon, promising to bring us respite and ease for what we have lost even as it carries away in its stumpy arms what little we have held on to.

That night she, Anne, tells him: I've thought about you all day. I've had this feeling, this sense, that something is wrong.

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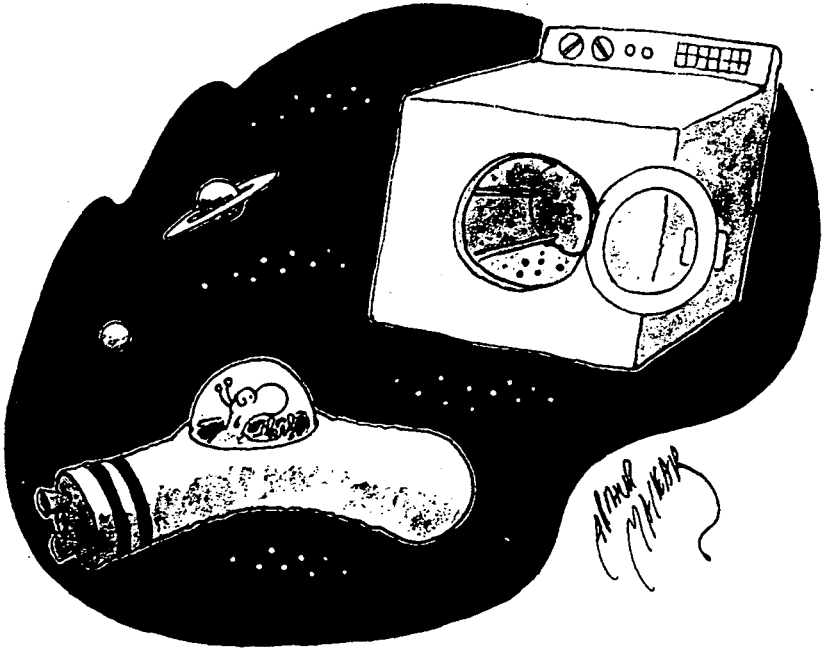
The question trembles between them and expires. They've lit a candle, and its pale light washes erratically over them and into the room's corners.

It's nothing, he says. Memories. Ghosts.

Briefly, her face moves down to him, then back into the darkness above, where she arches her back and begins to move, very slowly and without words, at levels words cannot penetrate, upon him.

Somehow, instinctively, he knows they are not alone. And though he does not move, something moves within him. He watches as, without volition, his hands rise, not to her breasts, Anne's, but to her neck, where they whiten. He watches her face there, like a flower's, the surprise, the growing shock and struggle, the sudden stillness. And on his lips in that speechless room, he finds the word *forever.*



"It seems harmless enough, Starbase. I'm going to check it out."

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Lisa Mason's off-beat story, "Destination," uses the tools of horror to tell an affecting tale of isolation. Her short fiction has appeared in Omni *and* Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. *Her first novel,* Arachne, *has just come out in paperback by Avon. "Destination" marks her first appearance in* F&SF.

Destination

By Lisa Mason

SAL RUNS LOW on gas, cash, and inner peace ninety miles west of Provo, so on a whim she swings through Boulder, aiming to pick up riders. Sal, Frankie'd say, if I told you once, I told you a thousand times. Just 'cause you got a whim don't mean you got to go do it.

But Frankie isn't here to tell her, and the radio rails on about the trail of blood from L.A. to New York and back again. Sal's eastbound from L.A. herself. Small chance she'd run into the Slash-N-Basher, who they think is heading west.

But between eastbound and west there's just a thin white line and the speed in your wheels. Deep night, the scrub plains of Nevada, mountains stark as a moonscape, make her lonely and a little bit scared.

Dawn stabs her eyes, but the ride board at the U. of Colorado Student

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Union doesn't let her down. Her '78 sea-green Olds Delta Royale is one big boat. Takes five skinny Deadheads, or married folks with a couple of kids, or four freshmen with a week's change of clothes. Sal decided three eastbound one-ways with a hundred bucks each and a bedroll will do.

First one is a tough old guy, shorter than Sal. He hates that a slip of a girl like her's got two inches on him. A boar-bristle butch, wind-scoured skin, whittled cheeks of the poor who eat lean 'cause they got to. Beneath the unbuttoned collar of his redneck rags, Sal sees the bridge of a spaceship silk-screened on a T-shirt. "Call me Wingy," he says, picking stained teeth with the black nail of his left pinkie finger. Then she sees the stump bared beneath the rolled-back cuff of his right sleeve. "Oil rigs in Loozeeanna," Wingy says, "They a bitch." He dares her to look away. She does.

Second one hitches up cheap leather pants beneath his ample gnome belly, loosens a brass boar's-head belt buckle nestled over his balls. Goat-bearded, sunglassed courtesy of Taiwan, he finger-combs brown hair hanging longer down his shoulders than Sal's. Paisley silks braided with suede thongs bind his forehead, neck, wrists, knees. Odd little things dangle off him here and there: silver-tone skull and crossbones, a ten-karat-gold Sicilian fig, black plastic spiders, tiny brass Tibetan bells. Pinned across his chest are buttons that say *Eat Me* and *Crack Heads Today*, or picture John Lennon's face and a spaceship poised above a red planet. Toes curling out of his sandals are cleaner than Wingy's fingernails, but the ice in his eyes and the sneer on his lips hint he hasn't worked an honest day in decades. "Folks call me Jive," he says, "and so can you." She does.

Three's lucky, they say, and the third, thank the Lord, he's a prince. Six two, if he's an inch, and solid as a rock. Blond locks lick his neck, kiss his tanned forehead. Some say ordinary faces are the most beautiful: half-moon brows, eyes true-blue as the Colorado sky, ski-slope nose, a mouth that ought to know how to eat a peach. Sal smiles, but the baby blues dart down, dart away. A shy one, she sighs. He pulls off his lambskin bomber jacket, acorn leather with fur trim. Beneath the jacket a crisp cotton shirt, clean jeans. His boots are new, stiff with buffed leather. Over his shoulder a bright-orange nylon backpack. He carries a paperback book, slick cover, the airbrushed illustration of a spaceship warping through galaxies. "You can put the backpack in the trunk," he says. She does.

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Maybe the others are low to him, Sal thinks as she pops open the trunk. Make him nervous, nice kid like this. Maybe.... Baby blues darting down; you can put it in the trunk. Maybe he sees her that way, too. Sure she's dragged out and funky; two days on the road'll do that to the Queen of fucking England. Now Sal, Frankie'd say, don't get your blood boiling over no damn thing. She whirls round. If you're too good for us, she starts to say, shove off.

But they are shooting the breeze. Oh, they are having a time.

"How 'bout you, buddy?" Wingy says, clapping the prince on the back. "What's your handle?"

"It's my eyes," he says. Damn if he doesn't blush, a fine pink misting his cheekbones.

"Blue?" Jive says, grinning.

"Baby Blue," Prince confesses.

"Babe," Jive says. "We'll call him Babe."

Babe smiles like a bridegroom. Then he glances at Sal, sweet and furtive. Her knees go weak. Babe.

"Listen up, you guys," she says, slamming the trunk. "Frankie wants me in Detroit, two days. No drugs, no drinking, no funny stuff. Share the wheel, the gas, and that's about it. Got it?"

They nod, pile in. If any of them has got a secret to hide, he doesn't let on.

The new day shimmers. The continent shifts from moonscape to flatlands, rich and fetid beneath sun-struck skies. Sal loves to drive the open road. The Olds guns up, begins to gallop beneath her. Never mind the rust and clunky fenders. Power and speed are hers till she reaches her destination.

"Where you from, Jive?" Wingy says.

"New Orleans," Jive says. "Been living every damn place, though. From New York to L.A. Did some deals in Mexico a while back. Things crazy there."

"How 'bout you, Babe?"

"I've just been here," Babe says.

"Where?"

"Just, you know. Here."

Wingy is bored. "And where you bound, Jive?"

"Doing some deals in Shy-Town," Jive says.

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"Chicago! Now there's a big titty. Some deals?"

"Lady don't want to hear. How 'bout you, brother?"

"Got to catch up with kin in Fort Dodge," Wingy says. He scoots round in the front seat next to Sal, pushing at his shirt with the stump like he's got an itch he can't scratch. For a split second she sees the glint of a Saturday Night stuck in his belt.

The twangy song on the radio dies. Slash-N-Basher, the radio says. No known motive. No connection to the victims. Senseless. They use that word a lot. Also, brutal.

"Yep, I'll catch 'em," Wingy says. "Mother of my son took him up Fort Dodge. Been chasing all over tarnation till I found out where the bitch is. I mean to get him back. Boy is meant to be with his daddy."

"That's right," Jive says. "You want your boy back, you take him."

"Get my boy back," Wingy says, "if I got to kill her. Her, and anybody what gets in my way."

Nebraska is guileless as a cow's smile, but you can feel its secrets hidden in the wheat roots, cabalas nestled in corn husks. What sacrificial victims lie on secret altars, throats smiling reverentially, brains bashed? Who couples with the goddess, earth clods clinging to his beard, seeds tangled in his hair, to ensure this abundance?

Sal stops for gas outside North Platte. Hands starting to shake.

"How 'bout this," she says, trying to make friends. "We all got us spaceships. There's Wingy's T-shirt, and Jive's button, and Babe's paperback book. Isn't that cool? What do they call that, anyway?"

"Speak o' the Devil," Wingy says. "Jump my bones."

"Oh wow," Jive says. "Weird, man."

"A coincidence," Babe says. "Synchronicity."

"Nah," Sal says. "I'll tell you what. Movie promotion."

"How 'bout you, girl?" Wingy says, winking at the others. "Where's your spaceship?"

Well, she shouldn't have — and that, Frankie'd say, is a fact. But the Nevadan moonscape and the cruel dawns have made her so lonely. The box lies at her feet beside the brake pedal, so she shows them what she's driven all the way to California and back to get.

It's a toy. Looks exactly like the spaceship in the movie. Damn if it isn't a pretty little thing, with a robot voice that says the alphabet and

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three multiplication tables. A simple math coprocessor inside does the trick. And you know what? Can't get this toy, or its math coprocessor, anywhere in the world except at the amusement park in Anaheim. Not by luck, theft, or mail order. Talk about exclusive. Sal had fun at the park, anyway. Bought other souvenirs: a mug with painted ducks, a hat with mouse ears, a stuffed dog stained with ketchup.

"I had a dog," Jive says. "Up and died."

"Old?" Wingy says.

"Nah. Bag we made him swallow bust open before we could even get to Austin. Coulda wrung the lil' bastard's neck, I was so pissed."

"Some dog," Wingy says.

"Some bag," Jive says.

They pile back into the Olds as a full moon sashays out of the east. Jive must have smoked something in the john, bloodshot eyes, a drawl too slow for New Orleans. Babe lives up to his rock impression.

But Sal is beat. Eyes full of sand, neck cranky, she's nodding out. She gives the wheel to Wingy, but she is not happy. "Can you handle it?" she says.

"You shittin' me, girl?" he says.

"I mean, can you *han*dle it?" She steels her eyes the way Frankie taught her at him and his gimpy stump.

He takes the wheel with his left hand, firmly props it with the stump on the right.

Wingy'll have to do. Sal climbs into the backseat, drops deep into sleep. Dreams: A million electrical fingers tear at a blood-red sky. A spaceship plummets into the orbit of a hostile planet and, seized by gravity, cannot escape.

WAKES WITH nightmares, eyes filmy, spine sore. Fluorescent-orange road posts marking the gravel shoulder knock now and again at the Olds's fenders.

"Lord!" Sal says. "You trying to kill us?"

Wingy is slinging bull with Jive. His left hand digs at a bag of peanuts jammed between his thighs. His stump points the Olds in the general direction of the road. He's doing eighty, eighty-five miles an hour.

"Buddy, it's fate," Wingy says. "Yessir."

"What's that, man?" Jive says.

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"You wanna pull over?" Sal says.

"We all got spaceships. It's a sign, buddy. A sign we all meant to be here. 'Twas meant to be."

"'Scuse me, brother," Jive says. "But ain't no such thing as fate."

"Fate is all they is, buddy."

"No, man. Nobody decides what I'm going to do, 'cept me."

"Hell, you don't decide every damn thing. You don't decide who you going to be born as. Do you? Now, do you?"

"I decide how I'm living my life, brother."

"I didn't want to lose my good hand," Wingy says. "I went to the job that day. Went to the job, just like any other day. And the goddamn rig come down and did it. 'Twas fate, pure and simple. I didn't decide, buddy. 'Twasn't a thing I could do about it."

"I fucking decide. I do." Jive rips off his button with the spaceship on it, flings it out the window.

"No, you don't, buddy. You don't, and I don't, neither. We all got us a destination, and we're gonna get there no matter what."

"Pull over," Sal says. "*Now*."

The parking lot is washed in blue when the sign flashes *Store*, drenched in red when it flashes *Café*. Rigs are lined up like cows at a trough. Which one'll meet the butcher tonight, jackknifed in the dawn, load flung on the road, cab crushed in a ditch?

Wingy goes to the store 'cause it's cheaper, comes back with a box stuffed with Styrofoam cups of steaming coffee, a chunk of cheese, foot-long salami, loaf of bread in a wax-paper bag.

Babe picks up the cheese. "How are we going to eat this?"

"Lord," Sal says. Without thinking: "Anybody got a knife?"

Jive palms a shape, flips his hand. A gleam slips out, flicks tight: a six-inch jackknife.

Wingy whistles. "Some piece of steel."

Jive cleans off crud on his shirt sleeve. He grins. "Let's eat."

They stand, leaning up on the open car doors, shivering in the damp night air, while Jive hands round shards of bread, cheese, meat.

Another victim of the Slash-N-Basher, the radio says. Throat cut like all the others. Skull cracked like some: the hooker in L.A., the teenager in the Valley, the waiter in Vegas.

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"They say he eats the brains sometimes," Jive says, chewing.

"You shittin' me?" Wingy says.

"Nah. That's why he bashes the heads of some. Eats the brains. Killing's hungry work." Jive takes a chaw off the salami. "Mm-mm."

"How'd you know?" Wingy says.

"Oh, I just know," Jive says, winking at Sal.

"Do you mind?" Sal says, flinging her slice of salami in the grass.

"Poor little thing," Wingy says. "You think she decided to get killed by the Slash-N-Basher? Huh, buddy?"

"Wasn't paying attention, is all," Jive says. "In the wrong place at the wrong time, brother."

"Sounds like fate to me. That sound like fate to you, Babe?"

"There's no fate," Babe says. "And there's no free will, either."

They turn and stare.

"Then what is there, Babe?" Sal says.

"There's only me," he says, and smiles.

Wingy goes to use the john; Jive goes into the café; Babe asks to get into the trunk. Sal pops it open. He puts his paperback book into his orange backpack.

"So where you going?" she says.

"Ann Arbor," he says.

"Where in Ann Arbor?"

"Just Ann Arbor. It's on your way to Detroit."

Great. Why are good looks wasted on the stupid? she thinks. Frankie's not a looker, but she'd be lost without him. He's the one who found out about the toy spaceship. Once he figured the specs of the math co-processor, he had to have one. I can do something with this, Sal, he said. Get us fixed up good.He'd have gone to California himself, but he had to stay, get the repair work done. And that was that. He let her go only if she promised to come right back. Frankie my man, Sal thinks, I promise. And all of a sudden she's missing him so bad it's like an ache in her belly.

"Let's get out of here," she says.

Babe shrugs, piles into the backseat.

Lord, she thinks. Have to do every damn thing myself. She goes to the café. Smoke-choked, fizzy lights, songs twanging on the juke. The waitress sports foot-high hair and rhinestone cat eyes. Ragtag men bend over a

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linoleum counter stacked with coffee, steak, eggs, pie. They slowly rise from their food, turn and stare at her. Jive's nowhere. Out back, the waitress jerks her thumb. A grizzled driver at the counter pinches his nose shut with his thumb and forefinger, flashes a mouthful of gold teeth.

She goes round back to an outhouse, sidles up to the door holding her breath.

"I'm leaving," she calls. "You're not back to the car in five, I'm gone and I'm keeping your hundred bucks."

Jive flings back the door. Eyes popping, face slicked with sweat. "Come here," he growls.

"No way," she says, poised to run.

"Get in here!" He sprints over, grabs her arm, hustles her inside.

Beneath a light bulb hanging on a chain, Wingy sprawls on the outhouse seat, half-falling through the hole. Jeans pushed down below his knees, Saturday Night clutched in his left hand. His eyes stare at them, neck sliced ear to ear. Sal thinks of the salami, Jive's knife hacking off rounds of it. Blood still spurts from the fading pump of Wingy's heart, pooling down his redneck rags, drizzling over the spaceship.

Jive's hand closes over her mouth so hard her front teeth ache. His other arm grips her waist. He pins her to the wall.

"Now you listen, listen good," he whispers in her ear. "Wasn't me, lady. Hear me? Wasn't me."

She stops struggling at once, nods. He sets her loose.

They stare at each other beneath the swinging bulb in the stinking shack. Sal presses her fingers to her mouth, throat.

"Found him," Jive says, breathing hard. "I found him, now I swear."

"Better go tell," she says. "Guys in the café."

"Yeah?" he says. "Thought you got to be in Detroit by tomorrow night. Something real important. So important you gotta drive all night four days in a row."

"Something real important. That's true."

"We get mixed up with this, lady, you ain't gonna get there by tomorrow night. Not tomorrow night, and not the next night, either. Could be stuck here a long time. A long time. Understand?"

"We just . . . leave?"

"What if one of the guys in the café is the Slash-N-Basher? Huh? You want him to know we know?"

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"So . . . we just leave?"

Jive bolts from the outhouse like the Devil bit him on the butt. Sal wonders what Frankie'd say. Then she leaves, too, boots crunching the gravel like a million tiny bones.

Dawn glimmers again. Sal pulls down the sun visor. A face stares back from the mirror on the plastic flap. Cheeks ashen, gaunt. Eyes alien, wide and glassy, whites webbed with tiny red veins. Look like hell, Sal, she thinks. When has she ever looked good to herself?

Iowa's wider than a state ought to be. The road twists in curvy turns past buxom hills dotted with black-and-white Angus. The wildness of the Far West is gone. The land is lush, tame with civilization. The secrets have been forged into well buckets, built into barn walls, churned into butter and fried for breakfast.

Jive takes the wheel. For a suspected serial killer, he drives all right. Sal tries to catnap, but her eyes keep popping open, nerves humming like the axles spinning round beneath her. Where did he stash the jackknife? In his jacket, yes, but which side, which pocket? She can still see the gleam of steel bathed in the red café light. She jumps every time he moves his hand to twist the radio dial, finger-comb his hair.

"Where's Wingy?" Babe says.

"Found a buddy of his back at the café," Jive says, quick and natural. "Went with him."

"He left his bedroll," Babe says.

"Didn't need it," Sal says. "He . . . he . . . he . . ."

"Just a bedroll," Jive says. "Wingy said if any of us wants it, why, we can have it. You want it, Babe?"

"Yes," Babe says. "It belongs to me anyway. It all belongs to me."

Jive is jumpy, beating his palm on the wheel to the beat of the radio. Bouncing up and down, side to side. He keeps checking the rearview mirror.

"Watch the road," Sal says.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jive says, staring at Babe in the mirror. "'It all belongs to me; there's just me.' What's that mean, brother?"

"It means I am All That Is." Babe beams like he's blessing the multitudes. "And All That Is is me."

"That's bullcrap, brother," Jive says. "Bedroll belonged to Wingy. You

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ain't got some kind of right to it."

"You just offered it to me."

"I take it back."

"No," Babe says, smiling. "I'll take Wingy's bedroll just like I took Wingy's hand. He says it was the rig, but it wasn't. It was me. When he wasn't looking, I bit his hand off with my teeth."

"Shit!" Jive says, and swerves round a truck cutting across their lane.

"His son is mine, too," Babe says. "I fucked her. Took her in a whorehouse in Houston, gave her the baby."

"Space case," Jive says, wheezing.

"Oh yes," Babe says. "Wingy wasn't looking then, either. And you, Jive? You think the bag broke in Fido? No. Oh no. I reached into his doggy little stomach with my fingernail. I pushed aside the horsemeat, and I slit the bag, just like that."

"That's what you are, man."

"You people never do look, do you?" Babe says. "You are blind, oh little sheep of the meadows, ye cows at the trough. Don't get me wrong; I love you. I do love you. But I take what I must when I must. You, and your fate, and your free will, too; they mean nothing. Nothing in the end. What a happy coincidence that you all belong to me."

"You come near me, motherfucker," Jive says, whipping out the jackknife from his left breast jacket pocket. "I'll kill you. I won't think twice."

"Peace, brother," Babe says. "The Space Brothers of the Pleiades wish you peace."

JIVE TAKES the first turnoff to downtown Chicago. Noon sun cooks the concrete. Jive leaps out, grabs his bedroll, goes to the phone booth in back. What the hell, Sal thinks, need gas anyway. Glad to unload this old boy with his deals in Shy-Town and his poor dead dog and his six-inch jackknife. Good riddance, Frankie'd say, to bad rubbish.

"Trunk, please," Babe says like a child. She pops it open, goes to supervise the gas jockey. Wanders over to the Coke machine, coins a can of Diet. The gas jockey's got a tabloid spread on the counter. *"SPACESHIP BASE ON MT. EVEREST!"* reads the red headline. *"YETIS HIRED AS AIR-TRAFFIC CONTROLLERS FOR SPACESHIP FLEET!"* Lord, Sal thinks, isn't it awful cold up there? She shivers. Can't wait to see Frankie. Can't wait to see Frankie smile when he gets a load of our spaceship.

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The gas bill comes to twenty-five bucks even. With Wingy's share in the pot split fair, Sal reckons she owes Jive twenty. Twenty is twenty, so she goes round back to the phone booth.

The booth glass is translucent with slime and grime, shredded phone book hanging off a cord like a metal rat's tail. Behind the booth is a dumpster and the building next door, a blank brick wall going up a floor or more. Outside on the ground lies Jive's funky bedroll.

"Jive?" she calls, peering in. "Jive?"

Inside the booth is a smeary red pool, thick as Jell-O, sweet metallic death stench, phone streaked with the stuff. Flies buzz in a writhing, winged mass. A big rat pokes out of the dumpster, nose wiggling with excitement, mouth chewing, stained red. She stands there, stunned. Sal, Frankie'd say, move your sweet ass.

She does. Sprints, stumbles over things that aren't there. Darts round the station, pulls up to the Olds. The gas jockey and Babe sit on the hood, dangling their feet. In dripping hands they hold ice cubes, run the cubes over their foreheads. They look at her, fresh as children.

"Ready?" Babe says. He flings his ice cubes away, wipes his hands on his jeans, piles into the front seat.

She considers making him get out, hesitates. Can't pin it on Babe, now can she? Chicago's a rough town; maybe someone was waiting for Jive back there. The melting ice cubes make her think of Mount Everest. How can she stop now?

"Ready," Sal says, and climbs in. "Yeah, Babe. I'm ready." She guns the Olds, heads straight for her destination.

Sal handles the wheel sure and strong. Damn but she's dragged-out, four days without real sleep. Nerves sizzling, hands shaking. Eyes watching, watching his every move.

"You are, though, aren't you?"

"What's that?" Babe says, sprawling lean and long across the seat beside her, gazing up at her with his true-blue eyes.

"Crazy. Nuts. What do they say? Nutty as a fruitcake. I don't believe I ever ate a fruitcake. But you, Babe. You are a fruitcake. Come on. You are, aren't you?"

Silence. He bats his blues at her.

"Where are you from, anyway?"

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"Well, I was in Denver. Got out of Sigh Double You."

"Sigh Double You?"

"Sigh, like psych; psychiatry. Double you, the letter. Sigh Double You. Psychiatric Ward. They were very nice people. No, really. They gave me reasons to believe. Good books, nice new clothes. But, you see, I couldn't stay. Just couldn't. I left. It wasn't hard to do."

"Left when?"

"A while ago." He laughs, sweet and low. "Guess you're stuck with me," Babe says, "till we reach our destination."

Then he shuts his eyes, begins to snore almost at once, slides full across the seat, head nestling next to her lap like a baby.

Sal steps on the gas. Hurry, hurry, hurry. So tired, so damn tired. Metal drums bang in her ear; ghosts flit across her eyes. Nodding out from time to time. Benton Harbor, and she finds the Olds nuzzling the road's shoulder way too close.

She slaps her cheeks. Stay awake, damn it!

Kalamazoo, and he wakes. "My daddy was in the military," Babe says as though she'd just asked the question. "He was rich. We lived everywhere, had everything. Homes, servants, girls who would do anything, boys who would do anything. I lived in Berlin, Hong Kong, San Antonio, Beirut, Sidney, Tokyo, London. Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Denver, New York. A while in Denver, like I said."

"And after Denver?"

"I was sad after Denver," Babe says.

"Everybody's sad," she says.

He blushes. "I'm not really a Space Brother from the Pleiades, you know. But I'd sure like to meet one. I'd like to ride in a spaceship. Wouldn't you?"

"Sure."

He crashes out again. Another long hour, and she's clipping past Ypsilanti. Lord, how good to see Ypsi again. She takes the East Washtenaw exit going into Ann Arbor.

Sal's buzzing with joy. Unload this crazy son of a no-good bitch. College town; he can find another ride board, find another driver, another destination. Just get him out of the Olds. And no stupid mistakes, Sal, she can hear Frankie say. Heads up. Make a clean break. Watch him. Watch him.

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The next exit is a barren cloverleaf with a good half-mile of tossing weeds on either side. No traffic in sight but the highway pulsing oblivious below.

"Hey," she says.

He wakes, sits up.

"You can get out. Town's a mile and a half down the road that way."

He looks around. "You're leaving me here?"

"I'm not your damn chauffeur. Get out."

They both climb out onto the deserted roadside. Sal pops open the trunk. Babe walks round back, studying the dents in the fenders, the bug sacrifices.

Then suddenly it's happening.

He slugs her with a fist big as a dinner plate, knocks her flat on the grass. He is silent, hardly breathing, face like a mask. Sal twists away best she can, but she's tiny beneath him, so frail.

"Got to have you," Babe says. "I want you. Oh, you're special, Sal. You're something else. Not like the others. Truly you belong to me, everything about you, everything." He whips out a Puma knife, edge jagged as the moonscape of Nevada. "Especially your spaceship. I love the spaceship. I want that spaceship."

"No, Babe," Sal says. "Nobody's taking Frankie's spaceship."

With huge effort, wrestling it out from beneath her butt, she extracts her Axiomer laser stick. It's a wimpy little thing, but it will do. She doesn't have to aim far.

Then she spins round the cloverleaf, swings onto the open road. Chrysolite maple and birch embroider thick gravel shoulders. They say that once the Midwest was the heart of the world, rich in secrets. Now its heart is sunk in concrete, littered with fast-food cartons, bloody phone booths, corpses flung in dumpsters or in the long freeway weeds.

The spaceship fell into the planet. On the warpscreen, it looked red, this Earth, swirling with blood-colored clouds. The math chip was down; Frankie blew the calculation. They could not escape gravity's pull.

Wasn't like she and Frankie ever wanted to be here. They've had to hustle and jive, move around, stay two steps ahead of the law and the outlaws. Dumb luck that humans have their movies and their tabloids, a

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myth they want to believe. Folks that find out about Frankie and Sal aren't all that surprised before they take their secret to the grave.

The laser stick is just a bit of silver in your hand. Slits a human's throat like butter, splits a human skull with one stroke.

Frankie always said, Sal, honey, try the brains. He likes the eyes, too. Sal tried, couple of times. And they are good, Frankie. You're so right. They're good.

Maybe the toy with its silly little math coprocessor you can't get anywhere else in the world except at the amusement park in Anaheim will get their spaceship, the one tucked in the stolen U-Haul, up and running. Slog skyward through the heavy air, back into free-G.

Sal hopes so. She really does. She swings the Olds onto I-80. That's what Frankie's longing for. Get us the fuck outta here, Sal. On to our destination.

Ahead, a green road sign like a maple leaf: Detroit.

"This isn't bad, I guess, but it's not exactly what I expected."

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

A FIVE HUNDRED YEAR RESISTANCE

THIS IS the year we celebrate Columbus. There will be tall ships, tee-shirts, television specials, and all the public hoopla we've come to associate with a major event. Two Major Motion Pictures — *1492* and *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery* — are also scheduled for a propitious launch. Although, as I write this, neither has reached theaters.

When a Jubilee Commission was established by Congress a few years back to plan the Columbus Quincentenary, they were hoping to package an "uncontroversial" celebration that every American would want to participate in. They haven't quite pulled it off. Look around. Not everyone is celebrating. In fact, protests have accompanied many of the Columbus events. It turns out that old Christopher is not as "uncontroversial" as the Jubilee Commission originally thought.

There is little contention over the gentleman from Genoa sailing on the ocean blue 500 years back. The problem arises over what he did after he landed (half a world away from his desired destination). He "discovered" a place that was already populated. He lay claim to a land that other folks had called home for many centuries. For god and queen he set into motion a process of exploration and colonization (a.k.a. "conquest") that resulted in the genocide of the "New" World's indigenous peoples.

It wasn't just Mr. Colombo, of course. He wasn't really the first. And he definitely wasn't the worst. But he is the symbolic father of the Europeanization of the Americas, and the destruction of her established cultures. Not surprisingly, the remaining (so-called) Indians of North and South America have viewed the celebration somewhat differently; as if Jews had been asked to celebrate the day Hitler

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took Poland.

There are those who argue that all this is ancient history, not worth a twinge of guilt. And they are right. But guilt and remembrance aren't the same thing. Truthfully acknowledging the past, as that popular Santayana squib more-or-less goes, is our best hedge against having to repeat it. Of course, there are worse things than re-living conquest — if you're the Conquistador. It's just less than a high old time if you are the vanquished.

The moral issues of exploration and conquest have long been addressed by science fiction authors. Regrettably, Hollywood has been much more reluctant to delve into such themes — especially as they relate to the real-life history of this blue planet. Most American movies have unequivocally glorified the valiant voyages of discovery, and practically deified those who "tamed" and "settled" the great American frontier. The dialogue varied slightly from picture to picture, but the message of the classic western always remained the same: "The only good injun is a dead injun."

An alternative view hasn't been that easy to come by. That's one of the reasons Kevin Costner's sentimental saga of 1990, *Dances with Wolves*, was so embraced by American audiences. Younger viewers, who had never seen films like John Ford's *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) and Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), found Costner's filming of Michael Blake's screenplay something of a revelation.

In Costner's revisionist epic, Indians (with the notable exception of the Pawnee) are the good guys. Whites (with the cruicial exception of Costner's John Dunbar) are the ones portrayed as crazed, bloodthirsty savages. It makes for a nice change of pace. And Costner deserved praise for his attempts to bring authenticity to his story.

Although few were Lakota Sioux, key Indian roles in *Dances* were played by Native Americans. In this regard, Costner and his casting director, Elisabeth Leustig, came closer to reality than John Ford ever did. (In *Cheyenne Autumn*, the great director's rather stiff recounting of the Cheyenne's tragic death march back to their Wyoming homeland, from the Oklahoma reservation the U.S. government forced them onto, tribal leads were played by Sal Mineo, Ricardo Montalban, Gilbert Roland, and Victory Jory.) Likewise, Costner's South Dakota settings came much closer to a true "location" than Ford's favorite Western shoot in Utah's Monument Valley.

The trappings of realism aren't the *only* things important to a

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picture show, however. (If they were, all movies would be documentaries.) There must be something in the story that stirs the imagination and touches the heart. I never found any of that magic in *Dances with Wolves.* (The sluggish pomposity of it came close to putting me to sleep.) But in this opinion, I am clearly in the minority. The film was, as we all know, a megahit that took several major awards, including the Oscar for Best Picture.

Dances with Wolves gave us permission to feel sad for the Indians, but most of the warm, fuzzy feelings the movie invited us to experience were directed towards Costner's white-bread Indian-wannabee protagonist and his quest for the lost Eden. The film's Anglo hero, and its safe, historical distance, contributed mightily to the film's universal appeal.

This year's *Thunderheart,* which I consider far and away the better film, did well enough, but it certainly didn't even come close to *Dances with Wolves* in popularity and acclaim. Yet, superficially, the two films have a good deal in common, starting with a basic respect for the Lakota. And *Thunderheart,* like *Dances with Wolves,* is about a "white" man who lives for a time among Indians and is transformed by his experience. And *Thunderheart* tries just as hard to be scrupulously accurate about its historical setting.

But there is no safe distance afforded to the audience watching the history of *Thunderheart.* The film is set in the turbulent days of the 1970s, back when the FBI was trying hard to disable a growing Native American civil rights movement. It's not so long-ago-and-far-away that we can't still feel the full impact of the deceit and desperate violence of twenty years back. Screenwriter John Fusco and director Michael Apted *want* us to feel those outrages afresh.

They achieve this end, oddly enough, by having us tag along with a gung-ho young FBI agent named Raymond Levoi (Val Kilmer) as he is assigned to a tough murder investigation on a South Dakota reservation. Ray is given the assignment because the Bureau perceives a certain P.R. value to a fact tucked away in his personnel file, and hidden deep in his own consciousness. Ray is one-quarter Sioux. And none too happy to be reminded of the fact.

To Ray, the legacy of his dead, alcoholic "half-breed" father is a matter of shame. For those he meets on the reservation, it is a matter of derisive humor. His new boss, Agent Frank "Cooch" Coutelle (Sam Shepard) tells him on first meeting

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that he reminds him of Sal Mineo — a casual crack designed to bring into question both his manliness and his Indian identity. The full-blooded Sioux he meets at Pine Ridge are even more contemptuous. They call him "the Washington Redskin," putting him on notice that they identify him as a government token, not a member of the Oglala Nation.

This is obviously a man due for an identity crisis. And *Thunderheart* is as much about the lead character coming to know and accept himself, as it is about who killed a tribal council member named Leo Fast Elk. Cooch puzzles very little over either problem. To him, Ray should be a loyal FBI company man. Period. And he's just as emphatic about who the murderer should be.

Coutelle, and his allies, a Sioux vigilante group calling themselves GOONs (Guardians of the Oglala Nation), want to arrest a traditionalist radical named Jimmy Looks Twice (played by real-life AIM spokesman and poet, John Trudell) for the murder. A tough, sardonic tribal cop named Walter Crow Horse (Graham Greene) seems inclined to look elsewhere for the killer.

Ray wants to look for himself, but first he must learn more about this third world nation plunked down in the middle of America. One who can teach him about reservation politics is the Dartmouth-educated teacher and activist named Maggie Eagle Bear (Sheila Tousey). One who can clue Ray in to his own ties to the Dakota Badlands is the old medicine man, Grandpa Sam Reaches (Chief Ted Thin Elk). Ray's secret soul has finally come home to this desolate yet beautiful land (captured in all its harsh splendor by cinematographer Roger Deakins). His is a journey of the spirit, with the wily Grandpa as his guide.

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Thunderheart* is the way John Fusco was able to incorporate threads of Lakota religion and mysticism into his screenplay. These elements, everything from past-life visions to shape-shifting getaways, could have come off as so much New Age baloney, totally extraneous to the political murder mystery plot. But they don't. The author's own experiences, studying with a real life Oglala medicine man, Chief Frank Fools Crow, help ensure this.

And let's not forget the contribution of director Michael Apted. This British director, best known for his documentaries (including the recent *35 Up*), has always been able to bring a documentarian's clarity even to his fictional features (which include *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *Gorillas in the Mist*). In the case of

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Thunderheart, Apted brought extensive research knowledge to the project.

Just prior to taking on *Thunderheart*, Apted completed work on his latest documentary, *Incident at Oglala*. Executive-produced and narrated by Robert Redford, that film tells the story of the shooting deaths of two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1975, and the subsequent conviction of AIM activist Leonard Peltier for the killings. To call the conviction questionable is a considerable understatement. Amnesty International lists Mr. Peltier as a political prisoner of the United States.

The knowledge Apted gained in preparing *Incident at Oglala* is put to good use in creating an authentic political thriller in *Thunderheart*, the first feature film ever allowed to shoot on Pine Ridge. But, as I said earlier, documentaries and fictional films are not the same. *Thunderheart* works, because the poeple behind the camera used their hearts as well as their heads. And their commitment was mirrored in the fine performances of the players.

Val Kilmer is one of our finest young film actors. He has the power to make you want to go on watching movies you might otherwise give up on (e.g., *Real Genius*, *Willow*). More recently, Kilmer gave a superlative performance in Oliver Stone's excruciating *The Doors*. He *became* Jim Morrison, that great symbol of '60s excess. Morrison's opposite number, the buttoned-down FBI agent Ray Levoi, is also completely personified by the spellbinding Mr. Kilmer.

And the Native American players are just as impressive. Graham Greene, who brings wit and intelligence to his "buddy" role, will be familiar to *Dances with Wolves* fans. Chief Ted Thin Elk, a Lakota elder from the Rosebud Reservation is a new (very wrinkled) face, and an absolute delight in his professional acting debut. Wise in the "Old Ways," he guides young Levoi to rediscover the lost love of his father, and so embrace his heritage. And Grandpa's analysis of the spiritual myopia of Mr. Magoo is alone worth the price of admission.

John Trudell doesn't have to do much "acting" when he delivers lines about his connection to "500 year resistance." This veteran of the Navy during the Vietnam War, and of Alcatraz during the All Tribes occupation, had his wife, three children, and mother-in-law all die in a "suspicious" reservation fire — Trudell has consistently labeled it a "mass murder" — twelve hours after he burned an American flag during a demonstration outside FBI headquarters.

Like the Ghost Dancers cut

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down at Wounded Knee a century ago, Indian rights activists of the last twenty-five years, men like John Trudell, are all too aware of the price of resistance. Even a distinguished writer like Peter Matthiessen knows something of the penalties. His 1983 book on Leonard Peltier, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (which provided background for both Apted's documentary and Fusco's screenplay), was kept out of print for almost a decade through libel suits brought by government officials. Although Matthiessen and his publisher, Viking, eventually triumphed over this censorship-through-litigation, defense costs were astronomical and the book didn't come back into print until this year.

Popular culture's images of Native Americans far too frequently still consist of a stadium full of Atlanta Braves fans waving foam tomahawks at the opposing team, or Washington Redskins fans parading around in chicken-feather war-bonnets. (Native Americans have questioned how those same Americans would feel about calling a team the Washington Niggers and passing out fake watermelons to the guys in the bleachers.)

Meanwhile, in this year set aside to celebrate Columbus, Shannon County (where Pine Ridge is located) remains the poorest county in America. *Thunderheart* won't change that. It is a Hollywood movie, and should be viewed as the entertaining murder mystery it is. But it is also worth watching as a small remembrance of a 500 year resistance struggle that continues to this day.

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This year, the Catholic Library Association awarded Jane Yolen the Regina Medal. She has published 125 books; TOR will publish her most recent two: Briar Rose, *part of Terri Windling's Fairy Tale series, and* Xanadu, *an anthology of fantasy stories and poems. "The Gift of the Magicians" was originally written for Martin H. Greenberg's anthology,* Christmas Beastiary. *About the story, Jane writes, "When I was 13, for my birthday, my parents gave me a volume of* The Complete O. Henry. *I never recovered. I had hair long enough to sit on from ages 18-40. There is no truth to the rumor that my husband is a beast!"*

The Gift of the Magicians, With Apologies to You Know Who

By Jane Yolen

ONE GOLD COIN with the face of George II on it, whoever *he* was. Three copper pennies. And a crimped tin thing stamped with a fleur-de-lis. That was all. Beauty stared down at it. The trouble with running a large house this far out in the country, even *with* magical help, was that there was never any real spending money. Except for what might be found in the odd theatrical trunk, in the secret desk drawer, and at the bottom of the pond every spring when it was drained. Three times she had counted: one gold, three coppers, one tin. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing for her to do but flop down on the Victorian sofa, the hard one with the mahogany armrests, and howl. So she did. She howled as she had heard him howl, and wept and pounded the armrests for good measure. It made her feel ever so much better. Except for her hands, which now hurt abominably. But that's the trouble with Victorian sofas.

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Whatver *they* were.

The whole house was similarly accouted: Federal, Empire, Art Deco, Louis Quinze. With tags on each explaining the name and period. Names about which she knew nothing, but which the house had conjured up out of the past, present, and future. None of it was comfortable, though clearly all of it — according to the tags — was expensive. She longed for the simpler days at home with Papa and her sisters, when even a penniless Christmas after dear Papa had lost all his money meant pleasant afternoons in the kitchen baking presents for the neighbors.

Now, of course, she had no neighbors. And her housemate was used to so much better than her meager kitchen skills could offer. Even if the magical help would let her into the kitchen, which they — it or whatever — would not do.

She finished her cry, left off the howling, and went down the long hallway to her room. There she found her powder and puffs and repaired the damage to her complexion speedily. He liked her bright and simple and smelling of herself, and magical cosmetics could do *such* wonders for even the sallowest of skins.

Then she looked into the far-seeing mirror — there were no windows in the house — and saw her old gray cat Miaou walking on a gray fence in her gray backyard. It made her homesick all over again, even though dear Papa was now so poor, and she had only one gold, three coppers, one tin with which to buy Beast a present for Christmas.

She blinked and wished, and the mirror became only a mirror again, and she stared at her reflection. She thought long and hard and pulled down her red hair, letting it fall to its full length, just slightly above her knees.

Now there were two things in that great magical house far out in the country in which both she and the Beast took great pride. One was Beast's gold watch, because it was his link with the real past, not the magical, made-up past. The watch had been his father's and his grandfather's before him, though everything else had been wiped away in the spell. The other thing was Beauty's hair, for, despite her name, it was the only thing beautiful about her. Had Rapunzel lived arcoss the way instead of in the next kingdom, with her handsome but remarkably stupid husband, Beauty would have worn her hair down at every opportunity just to depreciate Her Majesty's gifts.

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So now Beauty's hair fell over her shoulders and down past her waist, almost to her knees, rippling and shining like a cascade of red waters. There was a magical hush in the room, and she smiled to herself at it, a little shyly, a little proudly. The house admired her hair almost as much as Beast did. Then she bound it all up again, sighing because she knew what she had to do.

A disguise. She needed a disguise. She would go into town — a two-day walk, a one-day ride; but with magic, only a short, if bumpy, ten minutes away — in disguise. She opened the closet and wished very hard. On went the old brown leather bomber jacket. The leather outback hat. She took a second to tear off the price tags. Tucking the silk bodice into the leather pants, she ran her hands down her legs. Boots! She would need boots. She wished again. The thigh-high leather boots were a fine touch. Checking in the mirror, she saw only her gray cat.

"Pooh!" she said to the mirror. Miaou looked up startled, saw nothing, moved on.

With a brilliant sparkle in her eyes, she went out of the bedroom, down the stairs, across the wide expanse of lawn, toward the gate.

At the gate, she twisted her ring twice. ("Once for home, twice for town, three times for return," Beast had drummed into her when she had first been his guest. Never mind the hair. The ring was her *most* precious possession.)

Ten bumpy minutes later, she landed in the main street of the town.

As her red hair was tucked up into the outback hat, no one recognized her. Or if they did, they only bowed. No one called her by name. This was a town used to disguised gentry. She walked up and down the street for a few minutes, screwing up her courage. Then she stopped by a sign that read MADAME SUZZANE: HAIR GOODS AND GONE TOMORROW.

Beauty ran up the steep flight of stairs and collected herself.

Madame Suzzane was squatting on a stool behind a large wooden counter. She was a big woman, white and round and graying at the edges, like a particularly dangerous mushroom.

"Will you buy my hair?" Beauty asked.

"Take off that silly hat first. Where'd you get it?" Her voice had a mushroomy sound to it, soft and spongy.

"In a catalog," Beauty said.

"Never heard of it."

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The hat came off. Down rippled the red cascade.

"Nah — can't use red. Drug on the market. Besides, if . . . He . . . knew." If anything, Madame Suzzane turned whiter, grayer.

"But I have nothing else to sell." Beauty's eyes grew wider, weepy.

"What about that ring?"Madame Suzzane asked, pointing.

"I can't."

"You can."

"I can't."

"You can."

"How much?"

"Five hundred dollars," said Madame Suzanne, adding a bit for inflation. And for the danger.

Beauty pulled the ring off her finger, forgetting everything in her eagerness to buy a gift for Beast. "Quickly, before I change my mind."

She ran down the stairs, simultaneously binding up her hair again and shoving it back under the hat. The street seemed much longer, much more filled with shops now that she had money in her hands. Real money. Not the gold coin, copper pennies, and crimped tin thing in her pocket.

The next two hours raced by as she ransacked the stores looking for a present for Beast and, not unexpectedly, finding a thing or two for herself: some nail polish in the latest color from the Isles, a faux-pearl necklace with a delicious rhinestone clasp, the most delicate china faun cavorting with three shepherdesses in rosebud-pink gowns, and a painting of a jester so cleverly limned on black velvet that would fit right over her poster bed.

And then she found Beast's present at last, a perfect tortoiseshell comb for his mane, set with little battery-driven (whatever *that* was) lights that winked on and off and on again. She had considered a fob for his grandfather's watch, but the ones she saw were all much too expensive. And besides, the old fob that came with the watch was still in good shape, for something old. And she doubted whether he'd have been willing to part with it anyway. Just like Beast, preferring the old to the new, preferring the rough to the smooth, preferring her to . . . to . . . to someone like Rapunzel.

Then, with all her goodies packed carefully in a string bag purchased with the last of her dollars, she was ready to go.

Only, of course, she hadn't the ring anymore. And no one would take

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the gold coin or the copper pennies or the crimped tin thing for a carriage and horse and driver to get her back. Not even with her promise made, cross her heart, to fill their pockets with jewels once they got to Beast's house. And the horse she was forced to purchase with the gold and copper and tin crimped thing began coughing at the edge of town, and broke down completely somewhere in the woods to the north. So she had to walk after all, all through the night, frightened at every fluttering leaf, at every silent-winged owl, at all the beeps and cheeps and chirps and growls along the way.

Near dawn on Christmas Day, Beast found her wandering alone, smelling of sweat and fear and the leather bomber jacket and leather hat and leather boots and the polished nails. Not smelling like Beauty at all.

So of course he ate her, Christmas being a tough hunting day, since every baby animal and every plump child was tucked up at home waiting for dawn and all their presents.

And when he'd finished, he opened the string bag. The only thing he saved was the comb.

Beauty was right. It *was* perfect.

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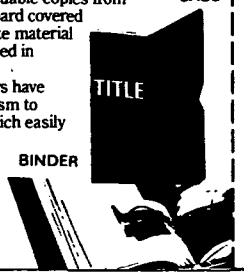

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Steve Perry has written novels, screenplays, short fiction, and essays. His most recent novel, Brother Death, *will appear from Ace in December. He is writing scripts for the new animated Batman series, and does a regular column for Pulphouse's writers' magazine,* The Report. *He also, in that busy schedule, finds time to train in the martial arts. "I've written a slew of martial arts stories," Steve writes, "but most of them have been about the fighting applications as opposed to the philosophical and spiritual sides. I wanted to do a piece that centered on the core aspect of the arts, and that spoke also to the idea of seasons. An alternate-universe China seemed the right place to put it —most historians believe that the sun-source for the martial arts was either in China or brought there from Tibet or India very early." He combined that background with taoism, zen and a quote from Ecclesiastes (3:1-8, for those of you who are curious), to come up with "The Master of Chan Gen."*

THE MASTER OF CHAN GEN

By Steve Perry

1.

THIS IS HOW THE STORY begins:

In the damp spring of the 3015st Year of the Spider, Wu's father took him to the temple of the Master of Chan Gen. Wu had but four winters, being born in the Year of the Serpent, and he later remembered only fragments of the long walk along the muddy path called the Golden Road. Wu's father was a cooperer, much practiced in carrying heavy loads of iron and brass hoops all the way from the market at Po Village to his workshop, but Wu was only four, and so, much of the time, his father carried *him* balanced upon one thick shoulder as if he were a rick of metal.

There were frequent forced detours into the ditch whenever a rich lady's palanquin approached. Wu's father would stand patiently in the swirling yellow-streaked brown water, sometimes to his hips, while some

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wealthy noblewoman's bearers strode past with their load, bare feet slapping the mud with even steps. His father never complained, for he was a cooperer and knew his place on the Great Wheel. Limited to his fingers and toes, Wu did not, could not, total the days the trip required, but he would recall that the mud was bright yellow where it was still wettest, turning a darker orange as it dried. It rained much, and so there were great streaks of this yellow and orange, like veins of gold and pumpkin entwined.

After the uncounted days, they arrived. The temple was much larger than any house in Po — indeed, larger than any *ten* houses in Wu's village — but not so fine as the Third Emperor's palace in Jang-ze, or even the Queen of Concubines' castle on the slopes of Mount Lu. A simple stained wooden palisade as high as five men surrounded the compound, pointed tops sheathed in cones of aged copper, and only the glazed-green dragon-scale tiles of the roofs were visible from Wu's height outside the wall. Still, it was big; he could tell that much.

There were many, many people standing or sitting outside the temple when Wu and his father arrived.

"Ah!" Wu said when he saw them. So many. More than all the people in Po. More than he had ever seen before; more than he had ever imagined existed.

"They wait for the Master," his father said. With that, he lifted Wu from his shoulder easily and set him upon the ground. Wu looked around, blinking with astonishment. A grove of red-jade azaleas blazed in full blossom, and the carefully tended rows of apple and tonguefruit trees on the sunny side of the temple wall flashed pink and purple under the spring sun. Bees flitted from flower to flower. The smells of spice and pollen filled the air, along with smoke from cooking fires and the aromas of roasting tubers and pork and goat. The rains had, for the time being, stopped, and the earth had begun to dry out.

It was all quite overwhelming.

Wu's father sat next to him and pulled forth from his hip bag some rice and barley and his soup pot. He struck a small fire upon dead apple branches Wu had gathered, and made a thin rice stew with dried carrots and jerky. They ate. When night came, they unrolled their mats and slept under the thickest sprinkling of stars Wu had ever seen. More even than the people sleeping upon the ground around him. The moon grinned down upon them, a thin smile for the month's beginning.

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Thus did they pass two days, eating, sleeping, sitting.

Wu, impatient as boys of four winters usually are, wondered about this.

"When," he asked his father, "will we go home?"

"Soon. The Master will come forth, and after he does, then we shall leave."

"Will we come back here again?"

"Perhaps you might with your own children. And if eventually your mother and I are blessed with brothers and sisters for you, I will likely come with them, if the Master has not yet filled his Hand. The Master choses equally among boys and girls, but each child has only one chance, you know."

Of course, Wu did not know. But since he understood none of this, it mattered no more than any of the other parts he did not understand.

"When the first blossoms of the tonguefruit fall to the ground, the Master will come forth and choose, or perhaps he will choose *not* to choose, and then we shall go home."

Throughout the second day, more people arrived, men or women, each with at least one child, sometimes two. The ground grew thick with people until Wu could not see past them. Surely this must be all the people in the world, he thought, except for those who remained in Po.

On the third morning, a slight wind blew. The smells to which Wu had become accustomed danced on the wind; they tickled his nose as the wind ruffled his short black hair.

Many of the many around him seemed to be staring at something, and Wu turned to see what it was.

A lone tonguefruit tree that stood atop a slight rise, too slight even to be called a knoll, shivered. Oddly enough, there were no people around this tree, and as Wu looked to see what everyone was watching, a single flower fluttered from a lower branch and drifted slowly to the warming earth.

A soft sound rose from the multitude. "Ahhh," they said, many voices together as one. Then the crowd fell silent, as quiet as the inside of a meditation chamber during a funeral.

Of a moment the temple gate opened, soundless on cups filled with rendered grease, not even a ghost of a creak from the giant bronze hinges. And there —

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There, frail and wispy, stood the Master of Chan Gen.

No gong announced him; no herald blew for attention on a many-curled tin trump. The Master stood alone. He wore a plain robe of green silk, cinched at the ankles; shoes made of unborn kid, dyed a slightly darker shade of green; and he leaned upon the ash staff bound on the ends with bands of polished brass. The slight breeze greeted him, fluttering the silk like an eye pennant on festival day.

The crowd drew breath as one, a mighty sigh of which the Gods might themselves take notice.

Wu could not see what all the fuss was about.

Grandfather Long Wu was more impressive — at least he still had thick hair, white though it was, upon his head. Save for bushy eyebrows and a scraggly beard that curled on the ends, the Master was as bald as Wu's baby cousin Chan's backside. Nothing more than an old man. There were many like him, even in Po.

Wu looked up at his father, who in turn looked upon the Master as though he were one of The Nine Gods.

Upon the seated crowd, the Master turned his gaze, sweeping it back and forth like one of the falconer's wrist hawks searching for prey. Apparently, something past Wu and his father had drawn the Master's attention, and the ancient man in the billowy robe began to walk toward them.

He did not walk like an old man, Wu saw. No, he moved like Wu's father; there was power in his step that seemed odd, somehow out of keeping with his appearance. He managed to find places for his feet without looking down, even through the packed and now-silent throng.

"He is more than two hundred winters old," Wu's father said, his voice a whisper. "See, he will pass quite near to us. We shall be privileged to see him closely. When I came here with Grandfather Long Wu, we were much farther away."

Why, Wu wondered, was his father so excited?

He watched the Master draw nearer. "Father —"

"Shhh. Do not speak."

Obedient, Wu ceased talking.

The Master drew yet closer. When he was about to pass them, near enough for Wu to reach out and touch the silk of his robe, the old man stopped. Turned. Looked at Wu. Leaned upon his staff.

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"Well, boy?" he said. Like his stride, his voice contained unexpected power. They were deep, resonant, those two words, stronger than Shan the swineherd's cry when he called in his roaming black pigs for feeding.

Wu glanced at his father. His father had apparently turned to stone, for he did not even blink. Wu looked back at the Master.

"S-S-Sir?" Wu said. He was most nervous, but he did not forget the manners he had been taught.

"Tell me what you see."

"H-H-Honorable sir, you are the Master. The M-Master of . . . of. . . ." Wu realized in that cold and stretched moment that he could not remember what the Master was the master *of*.

Best he think of something, and quickly, or his father would be ashamed of him. Of what? What was this old man the master of?

Too much time was passing. Frantic, Wu said, all in a rush, "You are the Master of old men, honorable sir."

A horrified and collective gasp wrenched itself from the throats of those close enough to hear, including that of his father, still stone save for his mouth, which gaped like a boated fish's. Surely the gods heard that gasp. It chilled Wu right to the pit of his soul.

The Master's laughter was loud and immediate. It seemed to go on for a very long time. Wu felt certain he was in much trouble. Then the Master stopped laughing and looked serious. "Truth comes quickest from the mouths of innocents," he said. He nodded at Wu's father. "Him," he said.

Wu's father smiled, a grin so large that it seemed to swallow his face. "You honor us!" Wu's father said.

"No, it is I who am honored." The Master looked down at Wu again. "Come, boy."

Wu blinked and looked at his father.

His father, still grinning, bent and hugged Wu tightly, then held him at arm's length. "Go with him, Son," he said. "You have been chosen."

Puzzled still, but obedient, the boy went.

This was how Wu, son of the cooperer Jang Wu from Po, came to join the temple of the Master of Chan Gen, in the 301st Year of the Spider.

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2.

WHEN WU was forty-six, a young villager with more courage than wits dared to ask him about his early years in the temple. The inn at Po was not crowded: no more than a dozen souls sipping at rice wine or early-season beer gathered around to hear the wisdom dispensed by one who had proved himself wise indeed over the years. Wu, who had revealed none of this to his wife or his own sons and daughters, laughed. It was most impolite, this question, and no one would have blamed Wu in the slightest had he ignored the rudeness or even upbraided the impertinent villager for it. But Wu did not do this. And because it seemed appropriate, he finished laughing and told of it.

"When we began, there were five of us," he said. "Named, each of us, for the fingers of the hand. Thumb, Fore, Middle, Ring, Little. Middle and Ring were girls, both two winters older than I. Fore was a boy with red hair, whose father, it was said, had been a pirate from beyond the sunset. Thumb was the eldest, born three winters before I. I was the youngest and the smallest *and* the last to arrive, so I was the final digit and was thus called Little. . . ."

3.

THUMB SPUN, threw the arm strike called Flamingo's Wing Challenges the Sun, and smashed Little's temple, hard.

Little sprawled sideways onto the packed sand, stunned but still conscious. It was a poorly executed strike, for he still had about him his wits. The Goddess of Fortune had chosen to smile upon him.

When Thumb, who was half again as heavy as Little, stepped in for the follow-up kick to the great plexus to steal his wind, Little snapped his own feet, left in, right out, catching Thumb behind the left ankle and on the same thigh with Mantis Hooks Fly. Thumb went over backward and thumped flat on his back. Little rolled up, did a low hop, hammered his heel into Thumb's great plexus, just below the sternum, and stole *his* wind. As Thumb lay gasping, unable to breathe, Little danced away and assumed Tiger Waits Patiently for Deer at the Water Hole.

He was, he had to admit, quite pleased with himself.

Thumb managed a wave of one hand as he tried vainly to inhale. When

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at last he found a sip of air, he said, still gasping, "Your . . . uh . . . match. . . ."

Now Little was really pleased. Thumb was fifteen, and Little but twelve, and he seldom won a match against the older boy. Tiger relaxed, sated, no longer hungry.

Abruptly, Little felt the pressure of a gaze upon his bare back, and he turned to see the Master watching him. The old man stared, unblinking, then nodded to himself. He turned away.

Little was unsure what this meant. Was the old man pleased with him? Or was he unhappy with Thumb? Thumb had been here the longest, after all; he should be the best. True, Little was a fast learner. Already he had achieved basic mastery of the first Five Dances: Falling Leaf, Bear, Two-Headed Snake, Kingfisher, and the Tricky Mantis. Too, he could read the letters his parents had the village scribe write to him. In Po, only the scribe could manage the Dancing Lines; but in the temple, all could understand not only Dancing Lines, but Square Cuts and Backward Squiggles, though this last one still came hard for Little. Even Thumb had trouble with Squiggles.

True, both Ring and Middle were still taller than he by a bit, but he was faster on his feet than any of the others. Such quickness served him well.

Life in the Chan Gen temple was hard, but no harder than chopping wood or making barrels, and there was so much to learn, so many things to do he would never have dreamed of doing had he remained in Po. It was said that the Master knew almost everything, and that he was the fiercest warrior who had ever lived; Little did not doubt this. It was an honor to be here, for in all the world, only five were chosen by each Master of Chan Gen. It was said that The Nine Gods Themselves smiled upon all who lived here, and Little believed that, too. Aside from the Master, there were a dozen priests and priestesses allowed to wear the green, a color reserved exclusively by Imperial Decree for those of the Chan Gen temple. They taught of herbs and numbers and maps and stars and construction and smithing and Law and the history of the Land of Contentment, among other lessons.

Yes. Life here was a wonder. Little could not have been happier.

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4.

BY HIS seventeenth winter, through seasons of searing heat and piled snows, of falling leaves and gentle rains, Little had learned all Ten Unarmed Dances and five of the Seven Weapons. He knew as much about healing as most village doctors, more about geography than any but the best mapmakers, and he could chart the Heavens alongside the Imperial Stargazer without embarrassment. He could build a house to live in, make a pie fit to eat, and even a bucket that would hold water, though his father could surely do this thing better than Little. He could speak with knowledge of the Gods and Demigods, knew of Fo Ping's Dozen-Year March at the dawn of history, and could carry a tune accompanied by himself on the nine-stringed longneck gourd. He had grown tall and broad-shouldered like his father. There were only three of them left training under the Master by then, Fore and Middle having left after conceiving a child together. Sometimes Little slept with Ring, sometimes he slept with Thumb, and there were few unexplored mysteries involving The Dragon and The Caves, for the Master had brought in Imperial Concubines of both sexes to teach them of the ways of physical love. Whether by accident or choice, Fore and Middle had omitted certain basic precautions during their coupling, and, having assumed the karma of a new life, could no longer remain in the temple.

Little's list of accomplishments, when placed next to those of any person in the village from which he had come, was far beyond compassionate comparison.

On the day when Little became eighteen, on a wet spring morning that fell in the Year of the Ox, the Master called him to the Meditation Chamber.

Seated cross-legged before Little, who matched the posture, the Master said, "You have studied for fourteen springs. There is no man — warrior or priest — who walks outside these walls in all the Land of Contentment who is your match in combat. There are few, if any, who can better you in overall academic achievement. You have learned much of the Way."

Little felt himself flush with pride. The Master did not tender compliments lightly.

"But this is as nothing," the Master continued, extinguishing Little's glow with his words. "Men are easy to defeat. For you to achieve true mastery, you must contend with enemies not of the flesh, but of the spirit. You have learned basic meditation, to achieve fleetingly the place of

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no-mind, but you must learn the ways of the Plane of Spirits, and only there will you truly be tested."

Little swallowed around dryness, his throat constricted. This Spirit Plane sounded daunting. He had worked hard every day for most of his life to learn the things he knew. If all he had accomplished thus far was as nothing, how could he even hope to prevail in this new realm?

The Master, as he had always been able to do, read aloud the freshest pages of Little's thoughts. "I shall teach you what you must know," he said. "The Way is the Way."

And since few things were beyond the Master, Little was comforted.

5.

LITTLE LEARNED, to his amazement, that the Plane of Spirits was nearly identical to the world he knew. The Earth, Air, Fire, and Water all wore the same guises. Men looked like men, trees like trees, roads just the same. The Way was the same — save for the demons and spirits as yet unmet, who supposedly dwelled in the land reached through his mind, all seemed to be as it was in the Land of Contentment. Farmers plowed their fields behind curl-horned oxen. The dung in the fields smelled the same. Fishermen threw their nets into rivers and brought forth redgills and salmon and pike. Women gave birth in the usual manner, holy bearers as they were of the miracle of life. Smiths pounded iron; cooperers made buckets and barrels; the seasons cycled; the moon waxed and waned. To a new wanderer in the Plane of Spirits, all seemed just the same as in the Land of Contentment. Perhaps it was a bit more rural, the woods thicker and more prevalent, but by and large, it could have passed for Little's own land.

Ah, but hidden in those thick woods, swimming in the rivers, lurking in caves, ever in the fires of any house that burned down, were — so the Master said — beings unknown to ordinary men. Spirits, some of them benign. Demons, *all* of *them* malignant.

The first time Little chanced upon one of these demons, he was accompanied by the Master. In this realm, however, the Master was not a bald old man frosted with white and a thousand wrinkles, but young and strong and only a few years older than Little himself. Little was somewhat surprised at this, but since few things were beyond the Master,

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not overly so. They walked along a crooked path through a garden near the temple, but outside the walls. Little watched the flight of a blue heron as it sailed gracefully through the clear skies, enjoying the warmth of the early summer's morn.

A cold wind blew suddenly, giving Little a chill.

"Behold," the Master said, pointing with his gaze.

Ahead of them a thing tramped from the woods onto the path.

To a dull eye, it might appear to be no more than a large, darkly robed man carrying a black staff. A sharper vision would see immediately that the staff was carved with images of Gohira, the cat-eyed Demon Goddess Who Eats Wayward Children, she of the pointed black tongue and teeth like a tiger. And the being bestride the path had grayish flesh that glinted even in the shade, and eyes filmed pure yellow, lacking apertures or other color. Its black hair moved as though alive, and a closer view proved it to be not hair at all, but a nest of threadworms. It stank of crushed toadstools. When it spoke, the demon's voice was as a knife rasping across a sharpening stone:

"Who dares this path?"

"Who presumes to inquire?" the Master replied.

Little felt his bowels clench and go icy, and despite his years of training, fear slid a cold finger along his spine.

"I am Sloth," the thing said, a grate of steel on rock.

If the Master knew worry, Little could not detect it.

"Stand aside that we may pass," the Master said.

"You may not pass," Sloth said. It twirled the staff.

Little's fear vibrated less in him now. The Master could defeat this creature; he did not doubt it in the least. No man need worry when walking with the Master of Chan Gen.

But the Master turned to look at his pupil. For the first time, Little realized that he had grown taller than his teacher, even here with the Master's young and straight incarnation. It shocked him to see this.

"Little, this demon Sloth impedes us. Remove him from our way."

The fear blossomed again, but Little fought it down.

The Master had commanded him, and it was impossible that he should do anything but obey. He stepped forward.

"Stand aside," Little said. The Goddess of Fortune favored him, and his voice held firm and did not break, as sometimes happened. For this, he

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would someday build her a temple — assuming he survived this encounter.

Sloth moved — but toward Little. He swung the carved black staff, and the image of the child-eater demon goddess smiled from the wood and came for him.

For all his size and obvious strength, however, Sloth was slow. Little ducked under the flailing staff easily, slid in, and circled the Kissing Flamingos into the demon's belly. Little's braced, bent wrist sank deeply into Sloth's gut, knocking fetid air from his mouth in a grunt.

Stunned, Sloth could not seem to move.

Why, this was easier than a match with Thumb.

Little spun into Leaf in Whirlpool and slammed the side of his fist into Sloth's head. The demon fell. The ground shook when he hit it. Sloth did not rise when Little called to him to continue the match.

Amazing. Sloth was larger than any opponent Little had ever faced, and yet he had defeated the demon with no more than two simple strikes!

Little turned to the Master.

"Let us resume our walk," the youngish Master said.

Quite full of himself, Little raised his head and looked down his nose at the fallen demon Sloth. "Yes, let us do that."

The Master laughed. "I expect that we might meet other such creatures in this wood; you should maintain your alertness."

"Oh, I shall," Little said, feeling very confident.

And indeed, they did meet another such creature shortly.

Of course, the battle with the next demon took a lot longer. Little won, but barely, and for weeks afterward he was sore from the blows he received. Weeks.

For Pride was a much fiercer demon than Sloth. Much fiercer.

6.

AND SO Little continued his training. Often he walked alone in the Plane of Spirits, and often he was challenged by the demons who lived there. Sloth troubled him seldom, for Little was not lazy. Pride came nearly every time, however, and there were times when Little was the one sprawled upon the ground when the match was done.

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There were many such demons who tested his mettle. Lust, Greed, Envy, Hate, Fear, Anger. Still, within a year or so, Little could usually overcome these demons in short order.

Other demons lurked in the forests and rumbled from hiding in caves. He learned to detect them, but only rarely did a new opponent come forth to challenge him. A laughing athlete called Scorn troubled him a time or two. Once, he was attacked by a blubbering fat one called Sorrow, shortly after Thumb left to make his way in the world.

After each of his journeys into the Plane of Spirits, Little would return and report on his trials to the Master, who would sometimes nod or smile, but who offered no advice or congratulations on these matches.

In the final six months of his twenty-third year, Little did not lose any of the matches, even those where two or three demons would attack him jointly.

In the summer of his twenty-fourth year, Little went forth into the Plane of Spirits and undertook a longer-than-normal walk. For three days and three nights, not a single demon challenged him. Little wondered at this, but not overly so, and the closest approach any of the demons made, a warty blue thing he had learned was called Worry, was not even within rock-throwing distance.

When it seemed apparent that there would be no matches for him, Little returned to the temple.

As he sat in front of the Master and told the tale, the Master's eyes seemed to glow brightly, and his smile was large.

When Little finished his tale, the Master said, "You are no longer to be known as Little. Once again you are Wu, son of Wu."

Little — no, *Wu* — blinked, surprised. For a score of years, he had been Little — he hardly remembered that he had once worn another name —but if the Master willed it. . . .

"And you are to leave the temple," the Master continued.

Surprise gripped Wu. "Leave? And go where?"

The Master shrugged. "That does not matter. Go to the End of the Earth and peer over the edge. Find the Bridge to the Sun and climb it. Where is not important, only that you are done here. I have no more to teach you. Your lessons must be gotten out there." He waved one hand.

With that the Master stood and walked away.

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7.

ALTHOUGH THUMB had never spoken of it to him, Wu wondered if this was not why Thumb had left. Perhaps Thumb now had a new name as well? Over the seasons, Wu — it was still difficult to think of himself in that way — had learned that all things had purposes, and that while some purposes might lay buried under a mountain or hidden behind the rainbow, that did not mean they did not exist. If one wished to know, then one might have to move a great deal of rock or perhaps learn how to fly, but the purpose, the reason, the cause was somewhere, waiting to be found. So it was with this command by the Master. If the Master had wanted Wu to effortlessly learn his reasons for sending him forth, then surely he would have told him. Therefore, the Master wished that Wu would learn by some other means, and so it would be. The Way was the Way.

Without regret or fear, for he had fought these demons many times and beaten them, Wu left the temple of the Master of Chan Gen. He wore a green silk robe, as was his right, and carried a staff of ash bound in brass. His feet, toughened by shoeless years, needed no protection, and, with nothing material save his robe and staff, Wu went forth. He paused at the top of the first rise and looked back, because the day was bright, and the temple's green rooftops gleamed and shined particularly well from this spot, but other than that, he did not tarry, nor did he leave as an anchor his thoughts.

8.

WHILE WALKING upon the Golden Road, Wu saw approaching a palanquin, the eight bearers padding along the dusty path evenly. Recalling his father's behavior when they had first come to the temple, Wu made to step from the road into the ditch. The season was not particularly dry as yet, but the water was only ankle-deep and would be of no great discomfort to his sturdy feet.

Before he could move, however, the palanquin's bearers veered from the road and themselves stepped into the ditch. All eight bowed, held the pose, gazes downcast. Inside the conveyance, behind a thin sheer of blue

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gauze, the owner of the palanquin also lowered her chin and gave him the top of her head.

Wu was as quick in mind as he was in body, and he saw that his green robe was considered worthy of respect, a thing he had never had occasion to learn before. He nodded once, returning the bow, and proceeded on his way.

He had decided that since one place was, according to the Master, as good as any other, then he would go back to Po. He had four sisters and two brothers whom he knew little of, save what his parents had caused the scribe to write to him, and it would be less than polite not to visit his mother and father after all this time.

So. Wu went home.

9.

WU'S RETURN to Po was cause for a great celebration. Though he was a villager born, they slaughtered the Honored Visitor Pig and set it turning over a bed of hickory coals. Old Ling Shu dusted off a cask of his finest aged ale and filled every cup as soon as it grew empty. The smell of sandalwood candles filled the air to join that of the roasting pig. The children performed the Centipede Dance under the long tube of waxed and colored paper that had been carefully folded since the Emperor's Sixth Wife had passed through three springs past. There was much drinking, laughing, fornicating in the bushes by those married and those who would soon have reason to be, and it was as happy a gathering as any harvest or planting festival, even if it *was* the middle of the summer.

Wu's father, though sixty winters old, still stood straight, and his pride in his returned son shined like a water-bowl lamp.

"This is my son," he said to the new villagers who had come to Po by marriage or birth since Wu had joined the temple. Of course, even the new arrivals knew of Wu, for a village that had placed a son or daughter with the Master of Chan Gen was itself made a little famous for that. Why else would the Emperor's Sixth Wife have bothered to come to Po only these three years past?

"My son was so clumsy," his father said, "that I knew he would never make a cooperer, so there was no help for it but that he become a Chan

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Gen priest!"

And everyone laughed at this. Wu realized that his father was made larger by what the son had done, and Wu was glad that it was so — but also sad. Did not the muse say that a man's merit must rest entirely in his own hands?

He would battle the demon Sorrow that evening when he took his journey into the Plane of Spirits, but it would be a quick enough fight.

Wu's mother, now a grandmother twice from Wu's brother Len, showed him off to her friends. She was the mayor of Po, adept in solving the few small problems that arose between families, and as shrewd as a local politician needed to be without being dishonest.

"See this lovely *green* silk robe," she said to her friends. "Such a color is reserved for the Chan Gen temple, you know."

And of course everyone already knew that, but it made her feel good to say it, and Wu smiled and thought again of the Muse, and that perhaps his battle with Sorrow might be a harder one than he had earlier thought.

Later, when most of the families had gone home to sleep off the effects of the most excellent aged ale and the perfectly roasted pig, the village scribe approached Wu. He was a young man, the old scribe having passed away two winters ago. Wu had noticed the change in the handwriting at the time, and had deduced this without being told.

"It is said that you understand a number of languages," the scribe said, "including the writing of these."

"This is so," Wu answered the indirect question. "I can speak seven with some fluency, though I can read only four of these."

"Including, I have heard, among them the Backward Squiggles."

"So it is."

"Ah. A man of your wisdom and importance surely has many things upon his mind and a multitude of tasks to accomplish, but I wonder. . . ."

Wu raised an eyebrow, giving the scribe permission to ask a direct question.

"If you should find yourself tarrying here in humble Po for any length of time, would you consider teaching a very poor student the mysteries of the Backward Squiggles?"

Wu had not considered his future until that particular moment, and while the Bridge to the Sun would certainly offer an unusual path, as would the walk to the End of the Earth, would he not be of more use here

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in Po? Since all men had to be someplace, was not Po as good as any? A man with his abilities could go to the Imperial City and instruct the Emperor himself, were that his desire, but did not the Emperor breathe the same air as the scribe here? Surely as the sun sailed the skies, when the Emperor squatted to defecate, his feces resembled that of other men.

Ambition had never been a demon that troubled Wu much.

"I would be honored to offer my knowledge to you," Wu said.

He and the scribe smiled at each other.

10.

SO IT was that Wu returned to his home and came to reside there. He built himself a house, and thereafter a small but quite beautiful temple dedicated to the Goddess of Fortune. He planted a garden sufficient for his needs, and never lacked for essentials of any kind, for the villagers brought him gifts. They treated him as if he were a wise man, an elder, which, for a man of only twenty-four seasons, was unusual; then again, there were no other villagers who had lived a score of those two dozen years in the Chan Gen temple. And in truth, Wu knew much more about most things than did any of his family or friends or neighbors. He settled easily into the role of teacher. He taught the scribe languages; the children, numbers and history; the adults, medicine and stargazing.

When, as seldom happened, Wu found himself unable to answer certain questions, he would merely shrug and say, "I am but a poor student. If the Master of Chan Gen were here, surely he would know the answer." And who could naysay that?

Wu wrote several times to the temple, where Ring still lived, and she replied to his letters, but the Master never did.

In Wu's twenty-fifth autumn, Ring wrote that the Master of Chan Gen had ceased to inhabit his body. Records showed the Master to have been 275 seasons of age on the morning of his departure. Wu wondered who would become the Master, and assumed that Ring, since she was the only student left, would do so. Perhaps one of the other priests or priestesses. He did not write to the temple again.

When he was twenty-six, Wu met the sister of a woman who had married into the village, and found himself taken with her laughter. She

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was witty, this woman, named Mayli, an herbalist and doctor for her own village. Wu courted her, and while she never pretended that who he was did not matter, she was not overwhelmed by his accomplishments. When, during a discussion, she said to him that surely his own shit stank as did any other's, he knew he had found a wife.

And so it was. Mayli and Wu married in the fall of the Year of the Lizard, an auspicious time, and he built his bride a new house with rooms for children. In time, they had four, two boys and two girls, who grew up laughing and sharp of wit like their mother.

Wu still practiced his fighting skills, teaching classes to the villagers interested. His best student was Ro, a girl of sixteen who danced as if she were no heavier than a feather.

And Wu still traveled into the Plane of Spirits. For most of the next years, he was unchallenged there, as he had been on his last visit at the temple.

Later some of the demons returned.

When his second son grew hot with fever, Wu fought for an entire day with the demon Fear before defeating him.

When his wife laughed long and loud at the jokes told by the Imperial Messenger over pear wine, Wu wrestled with and defeated a green-eyed demon who refused to declare his name.

On the day that his father gave up the ghost, Wu fought the demon Sorrow.

Years later, when his mother passed away at the ripe age of seventy, he was not challenged by Sorrow, but, at the edge of a small pond, he saw Death standing in his black hood and robe. Death waved at him.

"Come and try me," Wu said. "I know how to defeat you."

"This is true," Death admitted. And turned away.

As a man's life goes, Wu had no reason to complain. He did not have all the answers, but he could learn what was needed for the most part, and he learned it.

Life was good.

* * *

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11.

WU TRIED to teach his wife and children the method for traveling in the Plane of Spirits, that they might also overcome the demons that brought men low, but to no avail. Mayli could find and prepare all of the fifty-six curative herbs to be located within a day's walk of Po, but she could not seem to bend her thoughts to the meditation process needed to make the spiritual journey.

Wu's sons and daughters might have managed it, had he thought to start teaching them as early in life as he himself had begun, but alas, he did not think of it until they were all well into their teens. None could manage the quietness of thought needed to achieve the Plane of Spirits.

Wu struggled with Regret many times in those years, and eventually, as he had each time since he was twenty-four, defeated, too, this demon. The Way was, after all, the Way.

As an effect of his journeys to the Plane of Spirits, it was given to Wu to age slower than did other men. When he was sixty, he looked half that age; when he was eighty, still only half as old. Time did not seem to slow his movements. Ro, his best student of the Fighting Dances, grew stiff, her joints creaking as she stumbled even on simple moves, but Wu noticed no slacking of his own speed and flexibility. And in fact, while in the Plane of Spirits, he looked no older than he had at twenty-five, for he once saw himself in a pool and knew it to be thus.

Wu's wife grew white-haired and wrinkled, sagging more each year to the call of the Earth, but Wu stood like an oak, straight and tall.

All of the villagers who had been as old as his parents passed on, their spirits escaping to join the Gods. The time came when Wu was the oldest man in the village, but looked still to be in his prime, touches of gray about his temples, and a few smile lines, but no lessening of his hearing or vision or strength. Most thought this due to some magic Wu had learned in the temple, and did not wonder at it.

Mayli died at seventy-eight winters, surrounded by her children and grandchildren and even great-grandchildren, and her husband looked younger than her own sons.

Wu did not question this, for the Way was the Way, as it had always been.

Wu's youngest daughter died in her sleep at eighty-five, with Wu's great-great-grandchildren come for the funeral, and still Wu did not question it.

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Sometimes Death would stand and watch him when Wu walked in the Plane of Spirits, but never did he draw near enough to challenge Wu directly.

Once, Wu called to Death, daring him to fight, but Death only shook his head and turned away.

For the first time, Wu met the demon called Hubris, and the struggle lasted nearly half a day before Wu triumphed.

Outside Po in the Land of Contentment, time wrought many changes. Carts moved along wide roads under the power of water heated to steam, greased metal rods turning the wheels that had replaced human bearers. There was — so it was rumored — a device that involved a barrel of salted water and certain metals that supplied a bitter but almost magical energy that could be made to heat bits of metal to rival the sun, turning the night into day better than a dozen lamps or two dozen candles. The same device could be linked to wire, and a coded message sent for a day's walk in the blinking of an eye. A cannon that belched five times without reloading had been invented in the seaport of Zangzu. And the current Empress, the great-granddaughter of the Emperor who had held the throne when Wu had been a boy, was said to have embraced the religion of the Ugly Gnomes who dwelled across the Dragon's Neck Strait, and she now worshipped her dead ancestors in place of The Nine Gods.

Change indeed. The world altered, but Wu, affected little by time, continued as he had been, teaching the Way, living simply and quietly. The seasons flowed on.

12.

WHEN WU'S youngest great-grandson passed away quietly in his sleep at the age of eighty, Wu was himself 170 winters old. He looked a fit sixty. And he had begun to wonder about certain things.

The Minister of Medicine himself came from Jungdow to speak to Wu, but left convinced that the story of the venerable Wu of Po was a hoax. Science did not allow for such things — not by diet nor exercise nor chemicals — therefore, it could not be so. Wu answered the man's questions truthfully, but belief had not been in the minister's heart, and

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he left thinking that Wu was senile and confused. It was just as well; Wu did not wish to become part of an experiment in the giant medical center at Jungdow, and surely it would have happened had the man thought Wu's age to be what it truly was.

After the funeral of his great-grandson, when all the well-wishers had gone home, Wu stood next to the casket containing the remains of his flesh's-flesh's-flesh. In life, all things had a season — save for Wu. He lived while those half his age died old. Lately he thought much on this.

Change had continued around him. Smooth and hard roads crisscrossed the Land of Enchantment, stitching the cities and towns and villages together. Vehicles powered by electricity traveled these roads, spanning in an hour what had taken Wu a week to travel on foot when he had been a boy. People spoke through wires to one another over distances too far to walk in a month. Ships sailed the skies. It was said that soon such a ship would voyage to the moon and back, perhaps within a mere dozen seasons. Wu knew the theory, and believed it would happen.

No man now lived who had been alive when Wu returned to Po. Wu was the oldest man in all the land, in reports from any land from across the six seas.

Perhaps in all the universe, Wu was the oldest. And he thought much upon this.

He patted the casket. Wing had been a good boy. A good father, a good grandfather. And he had passed away, worn out by life, while his great-grandfather looked young enough to pass for Wing's son.

To what end?

Why was it given to Wu to live to such an advanced age?

True, he knew many things that his own Master had not known. Though Wu seldom traveled, he still learned. He read books, watched the electric glassbox and its images, followed the news, and kept himself as well informed as most.

There was reason for Wu to believe that he could live to be as old as his Master had been. Older, perhaps. But — why should he? The world in which he had come of age was simpler, but it was past, and things grew more complex each day. He could keep up, but where was the end?

What was the point?

Wu was tired. He was an anachronism, a thing out of its own time, and he had already done all the things that men lived to do. He had loved

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women, fathered children, taught students, eaten and drank and enjoyed all of the pleasures a man could hope to enjoy. He had become respected, had fought against the ills that plague men, and had triumphed over them all, including Death himself. He had even outlived his Gods. No one remembered the Nine now except the dusty scholars in dustier rooms, studying documents dry and brittle with time. No one save Wu knew what it was like to walk the Golden Road and step aside for passing nobles, for there were no more nobles left in the Land of Contentment. Indeed, most who lived in the land — so it seemed — were discontented. The old values waned, the old ways faded, and life grew hectic. People knew not where they came from, nor where they were going, and the depths contained in even the humblest farmer a hundred years past had turned to shallows in all but a very few. People attended great universities, but learned nothing worthwhile. The Way was the Way, but most were blind to it.

Wu slid his hand along the top of the casket, feeling the smooth cherry wood. What was there left for him in this world?

Perhaps finally it was time to hunt down Death in the Plane of Spirits and force him to fight.

13.

DEATH AVOIDED Wu rather adroitly until he was trapped in a steep-walled canyon. Wu had pursued the dark-robed figure for three days, stopping to eat and drink when he had to, resting for a few hours when sleep overcame him. He was untroubled by any of the lesser demons.

Finally Death found himself with his back to the smooth stone walls, and no escape, save past Wu.

The young form of Wu grinned as he stood balanced on one leg in Crane Fishes Along the Shallow Stream, waiting for Death.

Death approached, came to stand two spans away, stopped.

"No," Death said. "Not yet."

Wu laughed. "The choice is not yours. I have tracked you and trapped you fairly. You cannot pass without engaging me."

"True," Death said. "But I shall not."

"Surely you are not afraid?"

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"No. Death fears nothing but Eternity."

"Then what?"

"You are not yet finished with life."

"Ah, but I am. There is nothing left for me to do, and I am out of place in the world as it has become."

For a moment, there was silence and stillness. Death's face was hidden in the shadow of his hood. He reached up with hands that shined like black jade, and slid the cloth back, revealing his features.

Wu blinked. He knew that face. It did not come to him for a moment, lost in the distant memories as it was, buried under the years, but finally he knew.

"Master?"

It was not the face of the old man who had taught him, but the young face the Master had worn while traveling in the Plane of Spirits. Wu had not seen him thus for more than 150 years.

"Once I was," Death said, "but the Wheel turned as turn it must, and now I am . . . other."

"What does it mean?" Wu asked.

"I replaced the one who walked in this guise before me, as he replaced the one who walked before him. As one will come to replace me eventually, allowing me to depart. It is the Way."

Wu relaxed from his fighting stance, one raised foot lowering slowly to the ground. Because his age had given him a certain measure of wisdom, he thought he understood. "Tell me, do I by chance know the one who will replace you?"

Death smiled. "You do."

"And how long must you remain here before this one comes?"

"If I am as lucky as my predecessor, twenty seasons or so."

"Ah," Wu said. "I see."

"I expected you would," Death said.

"Then you allowed me to 'trap' you here."

"Of course. A man may defeat Death many times, but Death runs from no one." He raised his hood and moved toward Wu.

Wu nodded. Then he moved aside and let Death pass.

* * *

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14.

WHAT HAD once been a road entwined with veins of pumpkin and gold when turned to mud by the spring rains was now a paved highway wide enough for four lanes of traffic. The apple orchards were long gone, and the bright red jade azaleas had since turned to dust. The walls of the temple of Chan Gen were spotted with dry rot, and the copper cones on top were thick with corrosion where they had not been stolen by the venal. Decades of weather had likewise taken their toll in passing, and the dragon tiles upon the roofs of the buildings inside the walls had faded to a celery paleness, some cracked, some missing altogether. No one save a few curious historians and lovers looking for a place to be alone came to the abandoned temple anymore.

But someone had recently planted a single tonguefruit tree on a small rise that was not tall enough to be called a knoll, and the bright flowers danced on the branches in the small breeze under the early-spring sunshine.

And though the rumors were only half-recalled, a distant bedtime story by someone's grandmother, the people came. Some walked; many rode; a few rich ones even flew, these fliers having to land far away from the temple walls due to the size of the crowd that had gathered. Not nearly all the people in the world, but many thousands of them at least, covering the ground in all directions.

And on that bright spring morning in the 315th Year of the Spider, the spicy breeze blew a bit harder. A blossom on the tonguefruit tree shivered, broke loose from the twig where it grew, and fluttered to the ground.

"Ahhh," said the crowd of parents with their children.

The ancient wooden gate swung open soundlessly shortly thereafter, and as the crowd watched, the Master of Chan Gen stepped forth once again. No gong announced him, neither did a herald blow on his many-curled tin trumpet, but there he was. A bit younger than last time, perhaps, but still older by far than anybody gathered there to see him. Or in the world, for that.

The silent crowd waited expectantly.

But this is not how the story ends.

This is how the story begins.

For the Way is, as always, the Way.

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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

THINK OF THE PRESTIGE

THE SCIENCE of rocketry, and the science of weaponry, are sister sciences. It's been cynically said of German rocket scientist Wernher von Braun that "he aimed at the stars, and hit London."

After 1945, Wernher von Braun made a successful transition to American patronage and, eventually, to civilian space exploration. But another ambitious space pioneer — an American citizen — was not so lucky as von Braun, though his equal in scientific talent. His story, by comparison, is little known.

Gerald Vincent Bull was born March 9, 1928, in Ontario, Canada. He died in 1990. Dr. Bull was the most brilliant artillery scientist of the twentieth century. Bull was a prodigiously gifted student, and earned a Ph.D. in aeronautical engineering at the age of 24.

Bull spent the 1950s researching supersonic aerodynamics in Canada, personally handcrafting some of the most advanced wind-tunnels in the world.

Bull's work, like that of his predecessor von Braun, had military applications. Bull found patronage with the Canadian Armament Research and Development Establishment (CARDE) and the Canadian Defence Research Board.

However, Canada's military-industrial complex lacked the panache, and the funding, of that of the United States. Bull, a visionary and energetic man, grew impatient with what he considered the pedestrian pace and limited imagination of the Canadians. As an aerodynamics scientist for CARDE, Bull's salary in 1959 was only $17,000. In comparison, in 1961 Bull earned $100,000 by consulting for the Pentagon on nose-cone research. It was small wonder that by the early 1960s, Bull had established lively professional relationships with the US Army's Ballistics Research Laboratory (as well as the Army's Redstone Arsenal, Wernher

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von Braun's own postwar stomping grounds).

It was the great dream of Bull's life to fire cannon projectiles from the earth's surface directly into outer space. Amazingly, Dr. Bull enjoyed considerable success in this endeavor. In 1961, Bull established Project HARP (High Altitude Research Project). HARP was an academic nonmilitary research program, funded by McGill University in Montreal, where Bull had become a professor in the mechanical engineering department. The US Army's Ballistic Research Lab was a quiet but very useful co-sponsor of HARP; the US Army was especially generous in supplying Bull with obsolete military equipment, including cannon barrels and radar.

Project HARP found a home on the island of Barbados, downrange of its much better-known (and vastly better-financed) rival, Cape Canaveral. In Barbados, Bull's gigantic space-cannon fired its projectiles out to an ocean splashdown, with little risk of public harm. Its terrific boom was audible all over Barbados, but the locals were much pleased at their glamorous link to the dawning Space Age.

Bull designed a series of new supersonic shells known as the "Martlets." The Mark II Martlets were cylindrical finned projectiles, about eight inches wide and five feet six inches long. They weighed 475 pounds. Inside the barrel of the space-cannon, a Martlet was surrounded by a precisely machined wooden casing known as a "sabot." The sabot soaked up combustive energy as the projectile flew up the space-cannon's sixteen-inch, 118-ft long barrel. As it cleared the barrel, the sabot split and the precisely streamlined Martlet was off at over a mile per second. Each shot produced a huge explosion and a plume of fire gushing hundreds of feet into the sky.

The Martlets were scientific research craft. They were designed to carry payloads of metallic chaff, chemical smoke, or meteorological balloons. They sported telemetry antennas for tracing the flight.

By the end of 1965, the HARP project had fired over a hundred such missiles over fifty miles high, into the ionosphere — the airless fringes of space. On November 19, 1966, the US Army's Ballistics Research Lab, using a HARP gun designed by Bull, fired a 185-lb Martlet missile one hundred and eleven miles high. This was, and remains, a world altitude record for any fired projectile. Bull now entertained ambitious plans for a Martlet Mark IV, a rocket-assisted projectile that would ignite in flight and drive itself into actual orbit.

Ballistically speaking, space can-

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non offer distinct advantages over rockets. Rockets must lift, not only their own weight, but the weight of their fuel and oxidizer. Cannon "fuel," which is contained within the gunbarrel, offers far more explosive bang for the buck than rocket fuel. Cannon projectiles are very accurate, thanks to the fixed geometry of the gun-barrel. And cannon are far simpler and cheaper than rockets.

There are grave disadvantages, of course. First, the payload must be slender enough to fit into a gun-barrel. The most severe drawback is the huge acceleration force of a cannon blast, which in the case of Bull's exotic arsenal could top 10,000 Gs. This rules out manned flights from the mouth of space-cannon. Jules Verne overlooked this unpoetic detail when he wrote his prescient tale of space artillery, *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865). (Dr. Bull was fascinated by Verne, and often spoke of Verne's science fiction as one of the foremost inspirations of his youth.)

Bull was determined to put a cannon-round into orbit. This burning desire of his was something greater than any merely pragmatic or rational motive. The collapse of the HARP project in 1967 left Bull in command of his own fortunes. He reassembled the wreckage of his odd academic/military career, and started a commercial operation, "Space Research Corporation." In the years to follow, Bull would try hard to sell his space-cannon vision to a number of sponsors, including NATO, the Pentagon, Canada, China, Israel, and finally, Iraq.

In the meantime, the Vietnam War was raging. Bull's researches on projectile aerodynamics had made him, and his company Space Research Corporation, into a hot military-industrial property. In pursuit of space research, Bull had invented techniques that lent much greater range and accuracy to conventional artillery rounds. With Bull's ammunition, for instance, US Naval destroyers would be able to cruise miles off the shore of North Vietnam, destroying the best Russian-made shore batteries without any fear of retaliation. Bull's Space Research Corporation was manufacturing the necessary long-range shells in Canada, but his lack of American citizenship was a hindrance in the Pentagon arms trade.

Such was Dr. Bull's perceived strategic importance that this hindrance was neatly avoided; with the sponsorship of Senator Barry Goldwater, Bull became an American citizen by act of Congress. This procedure was a rare honor, previously reserved only for Winston Churchill and the Marquis de

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Lafayette.

Despite this Senatorial fiat, however, the Navy arms deal eventually fell through. But although the US Navy scorned Dr. Bull's wares, others were not so short-sighted. Bull's extended-range ammunition, and the murderously brilliant cannon that he designed to fire it, found ready markets in Egypt, Israel, Holland, Italy, Britain, Canada, Venezuela, Chile, Thailand, Iran, South Africa, Austria and Somalia.

Dr. Bull created a strange private reserve on the Canadian-American border; a private arms manufactury with its own US and Canadian customs units. This arrangement was very useful, since the arms-export laws of the two countries differed, and SRC's military products could be shipped-out over either national border at will. In this distant enclave on the rural northern border of Vermont, the arms genius built his own artillery range, his own telemetry towers and launch-control buildings, his own radar tracking station, workshops, and machine shops. At its height, the Space Research Corporation employed over three hundred people at this site, and boasted some $15 million worth of advanced equipment.

The downfall of HARP had left Bull disgusted with the government-supported military-scientific establishment. He referred to government researchers as "clowns" and "cocktail scientists," and decided that his own future must reside in the vigorous world of free enterprise. Instead of exploring the upper atmosphere, Bull dedicated his ready intelligence to the refining of lethal munitions. Bull would not sell to the Soviets or their client states, whom he loathed; but he would sell to most anyone else. Bull's cannon are credited with being of great help to Jonas Savimbi's UNITA war in Angola; they were also extensively used by both sides in the Iran-Iraq war.

Dr. Gerald V. Bull, Space Researcher, had become a professional arms dealer. Dr. Bull was not a stellar success as an arms dealer, because by all accounts he had no real head for business. Like many engineers, Bull was obsessed not by entrepreneurial drive, but by the exhilarating lure of technical achievement. The atmosphere at Space Research Corporation was, by all accounts, very collegial; Bull as professor, employees as cherished grad-students. Bull's employees were fiercely loyal to him and felt that he was brilliantly gifted and could accomplish anything.

SRC was never as great a commercial success as Bull's technical genius merited. Bull stumbled badly in 1980. The Carter Administration,

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annoyed by Bull's extensive deals with the South African military, put Bull in prison for customs violation. This punishment, rather than bringing Bull "to his senses," affected him traumatically. He felt strongly that he had been singled out as a political scapegoat to satisfy the hypocritical, left-leaning anti-apartheid bureaucrats in Washington. Bull spent seven months in an American prison, reading extensively, and, incidentally, successfully redesigning the prison's heating-plant. Nevertheless, the prison experience left Bull embittered and cynical. While still in prison, Bull was already accepting commercial approaches from the Communist Chinese, who proved to be among his most avid customers.

After his American prison sentence ended, Bull abandoned his strange enclave on the US-Canadian border to work full-time in Brussels, Belgium. Space Research Corporation was welcomed there, in Europe's foremost nexus of the global arms trade, a city where almost anything goes in the way of merchandising war.

In November 1987, Bull was politely contacted in Brussels by the Iraqi Embassy, and offered an all-expenses paid trip to Bagdad.

From 1980 to 1989, during the prolonged, lethal, and highly inconclusive war with Iran, Saddam Hussein's regime had spent some eighty billion dollars on weapons and weapons systems. Saddam Hussein was especially fond of his Soviet-supplied "Scud" missiles, which had shaken Iranian morale severely when fired into civilian centers during the so-called "War of the Cities." To Saddam's mind, the major trouble with his Scuds was their limited range and accuracy, and he had invested great effort in gathering the tools and manpower to improve the Iraqi art of rocketry.

The Iraqis had already bought many of Bull's 155-millimeter cannon from the South Africans and the Austrians, and they were most impressed. Thanks to Bull's design genius, the Iraqis actually owned better, more accurate, and longer-range artillery than the United States Army did.

Bull did not want to go to jail again, and was reluctant to break the official embargo on arms shipments to Iraq. He told his would-be sponsors so, in Bagdad, and the Iraqis were considerate of their guest's qualms. To Bull's great joy, they took his idea of a peaceful space cannon very seriously. "Think of the prestige," Bull suggested to the Iraqi Minister of Industry, and the thought clearly intrigued the Iraqi official.

The Israelis, in September 1988,

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had successfully launched their own Shavit rocket into orbit, an event that had much impressed, and depressed, the Arab League. Bull promised the Iraqis a launch system that could place dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Arab satellites into orbit. *Small* satellites, granted, and unmanned ones; but their launches would cost as little as five thousand dollars each. Iraq would become a genuine space power; a minor one by superpower standards, but the only Arab space power.

And even small satellites were not just for show. Even a minor space satellite could successfully perform certain surveillance activities. The American military had proved the usefulness of spy satellites to Saddam Hussein by passing him spysat intelligence during worst heat of the Iran-Iraq war.

The Iraqis felt they would gain a great deal of widely applicable, widely useful scientific knowledge from their association with Bull, whether his work was "peaceful" or not. After all, it was through peaceful research on Project HARP that Bull himself had learned techniques that he had later sold for profit on the arms market. The design of a civilian nose-cone, aiming for the stars, is very little different from that of one descending with a supersonic screech upon sleeping civilians in London.

For the first time in his life, Bull found himself the respected client of a generous patron with vast resources — and with an imagination of a grandeur to match his own. By 1989, the Iraqis were paying Bull and his company five million dollars a year to redesign their field artillery, with much greater sums in the wings for "Project Babylon" — the Iraqi space-cannon. Bull had the run of ominous weapons bunkers like the "Saad 16" missile-testing complex in north Iraq, built under contract by Germans, and stuffed with gray-market high-tech equipment from Tektronix, Scientific Atlanta and Hewlett-Packard.

Project Babylon was Bull's grandest vision, now almost within his grasp. The Iraqi space-launcher was to have a barrel five hundred feet long, and would weigh 2,100 tons. It would be supported by a gigantic concrete tower with four recoil mechanisms, these shock-absorbers weighing sixty tons each. The vast, segmented cannon would fire rocket-assisted projectiles the size of a phone booth, into orbit around the Earth.

In August 1989, a smaller prototype, the so-called "Baby Babylon," was constructed at a secret site in Jabal Hamrayn, in central Iraq. "Baby Babylon" could not have put

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payloads into orbit, but it would have had an international, perhaps intercontinental range. The prototype blew up on its first test-firing.

The Iraqis continued undaunted on another prototype supergun, but their smuggling attempts were clumsy. Bull himself had little luck in maintaining the proper discretion for a professional arms dealer, as his own jailing had proved. When flattered, Bull talked; and when he talked, he boasted.

Word began to leak out within the so-called "intelligence community" that Bull was involved in something big; something to do with Iraq and with missiles. Word also reached the Israelis, who were very aware of Bull's scientific gifts, having dealt with him themselves, extensively.

The Iraqi space cannon would have been nearly useless as a conventional weapon. Five hundred feet long and completely immobile, it would have been easy prey for any Israeli F-15. It would have been impossible to hide, for any launch would throw a column of flame hundreds of feet into the air, a blazing signal for any spy satellite or surveillance aircraft. The Babylon space cannon, faced with determined enemies, could have been destroyed after a single launch.

However, that single launch might well have served to dump a load of nerve gas, or a nuclear bomb, onto any capital in the world.

Bull wanted Project Babylon to be entirely peaceful; despite his rationalizations, he was never entirely at ease with military projects. What Bull truly wanted from his Project Babylon was *prestige.* He wanted the entire world to know that he, Jerry Bull, had created a working space program, more or less all by himself. He had never forgotten what it meant to world opinion to hear the Sputnik beeping overhead.

For Saddam Hussein, Project Babylon was more than any merely military weapon; it was a *political* weapon. The prestige Iraq might gain from the success of such a visionary leap was worth any number of mere cannon-fodder battalions. It was Hussein's ambition to lead the Arab world; Bull's cannon was to be a symbol of Iraqi national potency, a symbol that the long war with the Shi'ite mullahs had not destroyed Saddam's ambitions for transcendant greatness.

The Israelis, however, had already proven their willingness to thwart Saddam Hussein's ambitions by whatever means necessary. In 1981, they had bombed his Osirak nuclear reactor into rubble. In 1980, a Mossad hit-team had cut the throat of Iraqi nuclear scientist Yayha El Meshad, in a Paris hotel

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room.

On March 22, 1990, Dr. Bull was surprised at the door of his Brussels apartment. He was shot five times, in the neck and in the back of the head, with a silenced 7.65 millimeter automatic pistol.

His assassin has never been found.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Arms and the Man: Dr. Gerald Bull, Iraq, and the Supergun by William Lowther (McClelland-Bantam, Inc., Toronto, 1991)

Bull's Eye: The Assassination and Life of Supergun Inventor Gerald Bull by James Adams (Times Books, New York, 1992)

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Our cover story, "Seeing," is one of the best science fiction tales I've seen in a long time. It shares a metaphysical aspect with the other stories in this issue, but that aspect gives "Seeing" an odd, almost horrific sense in places. Andrew Weiner has played with the characters Martha, Duke, Denning and the child before, in a story called "Getting Near the End." "Getting Near the End" appears in his short story collection, Distant Signals and Other Stories, *published by Porcepic Books. Ace published his first novel,* Station Gehanna, *a few years ago. He has just finished his second,* Downside, *and is thinking about turning "Seeing" into his third.*

SEEING

By Andrew Weiner

I

WHEN HE CAME BACK from the beach, the boy was sprawled out on the couch in front of the living room wallscreen, watching the BBC superstation on DBS Europe. Men in bulky space suits were lumbering through the orange dust. One carried an American flag.

Mars. They had made it to Mars.

It was nearly a year since the ship had left in a final gigantic burst of publicity, so long ago that Duke had almost forgotten about it. And here in Martha's house in Corfu, it was all too easy to lose track of time. How long had he been here now? Three, four months?

"Hey Daniel," he said. "They did it. They really did it."

The boy made no response. Perhaps he felt that none was required. Perhaps none was. Often, with the boy, Duke found himself talking

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nervously into the air, as if to fill the gulf between them.

"A man on Mars," he said. "Isn't that really something?"

There would be many, of course, who would say that this was an utterly meaningless achievement, given the situation back here on Earth. But it was an achievement all the same

"Something," Daniel agreed in a matter-of-fact tone.

Any normal six-year-old would surely have been at least a little impressed. But Daniel was anything but a normal six-year-old.

The boy was looking intently at the man with the flag, identified by the voice-over as mission commander Mike Wyatt. "He's not coming back," Daniel said conversationally, pointing at the wallscreen.

"What?" Duke said.

"Him," the boy said. "He's never coming back to Earth. He's going to die there on Mars."

He was a strange child, Martha's son, and sometimes he said the strangest things. If he had been enrolled in school back home, it was likely that he would already have been picked out by Mental Health Administration workers as potentially dysfunctional, already placed under some sort of treatment. MenHealth believed in catching them young. Which might be one reason why Martha no longer lived back home.

He's going to die there. Duke had no interest in playing surrogate father. His own child-rearing days were too far behind him, and he had done poorly enough with his children. But there were some things you could not let pass by. "That's not very nice," he said weakly. "It's not nice to say things like that."

"He's going to die," Daniel insisted. "I know it."

The boy often claimed to know things. He knew when it was going to rain or when the local power grid was going to fail or when the cook was going to burn the kabob. The boy liked to play fortune-teller, but until now, Duke had never given the matter any thought. Only now did it occur to him that the boy was invariably right. Which was absurd.

"You can't know that," he said. "Nobody can."

"*I* can."

It was Martha's fault: she had made the boy strange. Dragging him around with her across the country for the first two years of his life, airport to hotel to stadium to airport. And then, after she had quit the music business, keeping him at home with her to share her self-imposed

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exile from the world.

Up on the wallscreen, the Mars story had given way to coverage of a major fire in Liverpool, England. The fire followed a week of rioting in three northeastern cities. Maybe, Duke thought, the Brits needed their own Mental Health Administration. Or maybe they already had one. It hadn't exactly worked wonders back home.

The boy watched the flames impassively for a while. Then he used the remote to turn off the wall. He got up from the couch. "I know something else," he said.

"What?" Duke said sharply. "What do you know?"

"Someone else is going to die. Right here in this house."

Duke stared at him, at a loss for words.

"Don't you want to know who?"

"Who?"

"I'm not telling." Daniel walked past Duke to the door. There he paused, turned back. "Maybe it's you. Maybe that's who it is."

Duke opened his mouth to form a reply. None came. He watched the boy walk out of the room.

He had been under no illusion that Daniel liked him. It was only natural that the boy would resent the stranger who had appeared so suddenly in his mother's life, after so many years in which he had commanded her exclusive attention. Until now, though, Duke had not fully grasped the depths of his hatred.

Someone is going to die. . . . Maybe it's you. Scary, coming from a six-year-old. Scary in more ways than one. Because no matter how hard he tried, he could not help thinking: *Like mother, like son?*

That was what some people used to say about Martha, back in the old days: that she could see the future. Of course, he had never believed that himself, any more than he believed it of Daniel now. No one could see the future. No one.

Why, then, did he feel such an overpowering sense of dread?

"Hello, Robert," he had heard the oddly familiar voice say as he came out of the dressing room and headed toward the stage, that cold November night in Montreal.

He turned to see a woman with a large floppy hat pulled down over long blonde hair, and antique mirrored shades over her eyes. She was

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holding the arm of a man with neatly trimmed gray hair and beard.

"It's good to see you," she said, taking off the shades.

He looked into those abnormally blue eyes, and the recognition dawned. "Martha," he said, astonished. "What are you doing here?"

"We were passing through, and I heard that you were playing. It's a long time since I've been to a concert. And Daniel has never seen one at all, except from a crib." She indicated the solemn-looking child trailing behind her, accompanied by a young woman. "Say hello to my old friend Mr. Duke, Daniel."

"Hello," the boy said without enthusiasm.

The boy looked a good deal like his mother. Perhaps he looked like his father, too, but Duke had no way of answering that question. No one knew who the boy's father was, despite the most frantic investigative efforts by the world's entertainment media.

"This is my friend Murray Snow," Martha said.

"A pleasure," the gray-haired man said, reaching out to shake his hand. A firm grip, a faintly British accent.

"And Rosie, my assistant."

Duke turned to smile at Rosie, and froze. At first glance, it was as if he were seeing double, so closely did Rosie resemble Martha. But as he looked closer, he saw that the resemblance was mostly cosmetic. Rosie had cut her hair like Martha, wore clothes like hers, used makeup in the same minimal way. He wondered whether those were really blue eyes, or just blue-tinted contacts. The color was right, but they were not Martha's eyes.

Behind this group hovered a muscular young man with watchful eyes, presumably Martha's bodyguard.

It was a small retinue for Martha. In the old days, she had traveled with an army of dressers and hairdressers, record company flacks and media hacks, protectors and advisers and hangers-on.

"Martha . . .," he began.

And then he was being waved toward the stage, where the pickup band was playing the intro.

"I've got to go," he said. "Maybe we'll talk later."

"Yes," she said. "I'd like that."

Robert Duke had once been a superstar himself, but Martha Nova had

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been a star of an entirely different magnitude. Like only a bare handful of performers before her, she had caught the lightning, burning fiercely with the energies of her time.

Earth Angel, they called her in her first newsmagazine cover story, the year she had broken out of the New Age Music ghetto to win her first Grammies. *Queen of eco-protest. . . . She sings for a dying world.* And her album, *Gaian Songs,* those mournful yet energetic laments, had soared to the top of the charts.

Soon the whole world was enraptured by the blonde young woman with the ethereal voice. She was a certified phenomenon, almost single-handedly resuscitating a moribund recording industry. She was adored in Tokyo and in Stockholm, in Belfast and in Winnipeg, In Milan and in Reykjavik. She was sometimes said to be the most popular singer in the history of the world.

But even that was not enough for her most ardent fans. For them, she was less a singer than a seer. For them the future sang through her.

Martha herself never claimed prophetic powers. Her fans claimed them for her. Often they would point to apparent connections between the words of her songs and succeeding events: a fire, an earthquake, the death of a public figure. These connections, although usually slight, were sometimes striking.

Over and above these specific prophecies, her fans heard a more generalized message in her songs. What they heard was word of the rapidly approaching end of all things. Among the generation nearing adulthood in the desperate dying years of the millennium, there were many who found this message exhilarating rather than depressing.

She forcasts the end, as another newsmagazine would put it, *and the children listen.*

And then, at the age of thirty-one, at the very peak of her popularity, she quit. The official explanation was that she wished to spend more time with her child. The show-biz oracles were quick to suggest that she could no longer sustain the pressures of her success, all that love and all that hatred pressing down upon her.

Duke knew a little about those pressures himself. He had gone through something similar himself, if on a much smaller scale. But Martha, when he had known her, had always seemed remarkably unaffected by it all. Of course, he could have been wrong about that. He had

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not really known her that well.

They had shared a few bills together, in the years when she had been on her way up and he had been on his way down. The first time they met, she told him that as a teenager she had pinned his poster to her bedroom wall. He had been flattered and alarmed at this reminder of the relentless spinning of the hands on the big clock that counted out his time.

They had shared a few bills, and a few hotel rooms, too, but it had never been anything serious. He had been too preoccupied with himself, with his own success and his own impending failure, to come to grips with the singer, with that curious vagueness at her center and with whatever it was that the vagueness might conceal.

As for Martha, she had seemed vastly amused with him, with his illustrious past and his enormous conceit and his still-frantic pursuit of new sensations. Amused, but no more than that. And when their schedules had pulled them apart, they had gone with the flow. And he had not seen the singer in years, and neither had he expected to.

After the show, they walked to a restaurant a few blocks away. Despite the cold, it was a luxury for him to be able to walk the streets after dark. Back in L.A. it would be lunacy.

"So you're still on the road," she said.

"Sometimes. Actually, not that much."

This was the first time he had toured in nearly a year. Even in the twilight of his career, the nostalgia surrounding his name was sufficient to fill the smaller halls. But with the problems in so many cities these days, and the on-again, off-again curfews, it was difficult to set up a tour. It was a little easier up here in Canada, where things had not yet run so far out of control.

"Supporting a new record?" Martha asked.

"Just playing." He had not had a recording contract in some years. "I get bored, sitting around back home."

"I miss it myself sometimes."

"I heard you retired. I never understood why."

"I wanted to spend this time with Daniel. And I didn't have anything more to say."

That was Martha for you. It was always nice to have something to say, but there were plenty of times when you didn't. It had never stopped him

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from singing.

They talked about the past, and then they talked about the present, about the riots and the police strikes, the gang wars and the citizen militias, the firebombings and the Mental Health laws, and all the rest of it. "It's like everything is falling apart," he said.

"Yes," she agreed, almost absently. "Falling apart." But she was removed from all that now, living as she did in Corfu. Back home, Duke needed a fifteen-foot electrified fence and four guard dogs to keep the outside world out.

He worked the conversation around to the gray-haired man he had seen with Martha earlier in the evening, Murray Snow. "Seems like a nice guy. Is he in the business?"

She laughed. "No, he's a psychiatrist. Although right now he's on sabbatical. He's staying with us in Corfu while he writes his book."

"What kind of book?"

"About the disturbances. The psychological origins of the disturbances. That's why he's in Montreal, for a conference on civil disorders. We came along for the ride."

The disturbances. Everyone talked about them that way now, as though they were some kind of force of nature. When you called something a disturbance, there was always the hope that things would eventually return to normal, whatever that was.

"And what does Murray think they are? The origins of the disturbances?"

She shrugged. "Oh, the usual. The breakdown of the family, the schools, the sense of community. . . ."

"Somehow you don't sound convinced."

"Oh, I suppose it's all true enough, but it's missing the point somehow. The disturbances . . . I think in a funny kind of way that it's the Earth, Robert. The Earth on the brink of a nervous breakdown."

"The Earth? We're talking about riots and bombings. We're talking about things *people* do."

"But we *are* the Earth, Robert. All of us, every living thing. And now it's like she's acting through us, trying to cleanse herself. . . ."

"By burning everything down?"

"If that's what it takes."

"Same old Martha. All doom and gloom."

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"Actually, I see a lot of hope. But first we have to get through these times."

"You sound like you're starting to believe your own songs."

"I always belived them."

Still flaky after all these years. And yet, all the same, he found himself liking her all over again. He had forgotten how good it felt being around her, bathing in the immense tranquility she radiated even as she discussed her most apocalyptic visions.

"Where are you heading now?" he asked as they rode in the cab back to her hotel.

"We're going home tomorrow." And then she said something that surprised him. "Why don't you come along?"

"I'm playing in Toronto."

"Come on afterward."

"I might just do that," he said, not imagining that he would.

He was in his hotel room in Toronto after the show, watching a report on the latest terrorist bombing in Boston, when the record company executive came to call.

"Great show," he said. "Brought back a lot of memories. I was here for a sales conference, and I asked who was playing in town, and they said, 'Robert Duke.' And I said, 'Robert Duke is my idol, man.'"

The record company executive's name was Matt Parker. He was short and stocky, with hairy wrists sticking out of the sleeves of his lurid green spiderfiber jumpsuit. His card identified him as Vice President, A&R, with RealTime Records in Los Angeles. At one time, Duke might have been excited by the fact that an A&R man from a major label would wish to speak to him. But he had long since given up hope of a new recording deal, and he did not allow himself to hope for one now.

"So I'm sitting here thinking," Parker said, "what happened to Robert Duke? What the fuck happened to him?"

"This and that," Duke said. He no longer had the energy to recite the whole weary chronicle of crooked managers and persecutory IRS agents, crazy wives and malevolent tabloid journalists, drug busts and car crashes, missed connections and lost opportunities. These days, it bored even himself. And he had come to see that what it came down to was basically a bunch of excuses. "Time, mostly. Catches us all."

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Parker nodded. "But there's this great thing about time. Sometimes it loops around. Sometimes what's old gets new again. That's what I said to myself . . . maybe Robert Duke's moment is going to come again. Maybe I could help make that happen."

Despite himself, Duke felt a rush of adrenaline. Was Parker really here to make a deal? Or just grandstanding?

"What are we talking about here?"

"A new Robert Duke album, what else?"

"Sounds good," he said. "Of course, you'd need to work out the details with my manager."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

"I'll get enthusiastic when I see a contract."

"You'll see it as soon as you get back to L.A. Or if you're somewhere else, we'll fax it to you there."

"Where else would I be?"

"Corfu, maybe. I heard that you might be heading there."

Duke made the connection, finally, the one that had been eluding him, or the one he had been eluding: RealTime was Martha's label.

"Where did you hear that? From Martha?"

"Martha? Martha won't give us the time of day. But she's still under contract to us; she's still an important asset. We keep an eye on her. We know she invited you to Corfu. And we see that as a real positive step."

"Positive? How do you mean?"

"She's reaching out, Robert. Reaching out to her past. She wants you around to remind her of the old times. You see, deep down, she wants to come back, but she's not yet ready to admit that to herself. She just needs a little push. Hopefully, you can give it to her. Hopefully, we can have a new Martha Nova disc on the racks, right next to yours."

Since Martha's retirement, RealTime had been skillfully repackaging her old songs and newly discovered outtakes. But by now, they would be desperate for new product.

"I see," Duke said. "I see that what we're actually talking about is a new Martha Nova album."

"I was serious, Robert you *were* great. And maybe you could be again. But it's an ify proposition, given the current conditions. We really need something new from Martha before we can afford to take a flier on something like that."

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"And if spending time with me doesn't make Martha want to come back?"

"Then you'll have to be persuasive. Talk her round. Tell her the whole world is waiting for her."

"She already knows that."

"Make her fall in love with you. Make her want to follow you back. . . ."

"You're dreaming, Parker."

"You had something once. She could fall for you again. What we hear is, there's no one in her life right now."

"What about Murray Snow? I got the impression that he was more than just a friend."

"More than a friend?" Parker laughed. "You could say that. He's her shrink. She used to see him almost every day back in Denver. And when she moved out to Corfu, she took him along."

"What's he treating her for?"

"Creative block. Too bad he isn't doing a better job. But maybe you can help speed things up."

Duke shook his head. "No," he said. "I couldn't do it. How could I face Martha, if I agreed to go along with this?"

"There's no reason she should ever know about it."

"But I would know."

"Look, don't decide anything now. Just go to Corfu, hang out with her, talk about old times. You're bound to do that anyway. She may come around by herself. And if she does decide to come back, there'll be a contract waiting for you."

"I couldn't accept it."

"Like I said, you don't have to decide now. Just go."

"Why? If I'm not taking your deal, why should I go?"

"You want to know your motivation? You think this is the Actor's Studio? I'll tell you something. Most people, most of the time, don't have any idea why they do what they do. They do it, and then try to figure out why. But if you want a reason, I'll give you one. You should go because you want to see her. And because you don't have anything better to do with your life."

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II

A FEW DAYS before the launch, Wyatt threw a barbecue at his house for the crew members and their wives and children. After dinner the three astronauts walked together in Wyatt's garden.

"It's going to be difficult," Wyatt said. "We know that. This is by far the longest voyage anyone has ever undertaken, in distance and in time. We have to promise each other now that we're going to support each other. We're going to have to keep our heads and show strength of will and try to maintain good relations among ourselves."

Wyatt was some sort of Baptist lay preacher, and he was given to speechmaking. Denning found it boring when Wyatt did that, although he liked Wyatt as much as any of the other astronauts. They were even buddies to the extent that, shut out from the inner circle formed by the others — Wyatt for his Bible-bashing, Denning because of a quietness too easily mistaken for arrogance — they had found a kind of solidarity in their mutual exclusion.

"Strength of will?" Fuller echoed. "Where do you get this stuff, Mike? And what is this get-together bullshit, anyway? We're not close friends; our families are not close — this is all a sham. And we're going to be spending enough time together as it is."

"This is how the Sovs used to do it," Wyatt said. "Before a mission, they would get together and talk it out between themselves."

"We're not Sovs." Fuller said.

"The Sovs knew a lot about space psychology," Wyatt said.

"Sure," Fuller said. "They played tapes of bird songs. It's bullshit; it's got nothing to do with us. *We're* the ones going to Mars, not them."

"He's got a point, Dave," Denning said. "We have to be able to get along. We're going to be an awfully long way from home."

"It'll be a breeze," Fuller said. The youngest team member, he had never even flown a shuttle. "An absolute breeze."

Denning said nothing to this. There was no way he was about to admit his terror about what was to come.

Space. All too much of it. Even growing up in that archetypal small town. There was the main street, and there was the interstate, and then there was the desert, stretching away forever under the deep-blue sky.

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Often he felt achingly lonely, as though the emptiness outside were somehow inside him as well.

He was ten years old when he watched the astronauts walk on the Moon. He was badly shaken even then, thinking about the sheer *precariousness* of it all, going out there into infinite space, dragging your own life-support system behind you.

He went to college and then, following his father's footsteps, into the air force. He was a good enough pilot, although flying did not thrill him the way it thrilled so many of his colleagues. He was operating a machine, and operating it skillfully, and he was able to repress thinking about what he was really doing, barreling through the empty skies within that thin metal shell.

Later he was a shuttle pilot, in the last days of the shuttle program. And he was able to do this, too, although it disturbed him in a way that ordinary flying never had. It was much harder to blot out the blackness and emptiness out there, particularly when you had to go outside and float in it, the Earth below you or above you, and the darkness all around you.

But although he could not deny what he felt, he could and did deny feeling it to others. "Wonderful," he would say, just like his colleagues. "Fantastic. Just a wonderful sensation."

Sometimes he worried that the psychologists might catch him out. But they never did. He never told them, of course, about his dreams of burning and his dreams of falling to Earth. And usually he was quite careful about his drinking in public, although at home he could put away an amount even he found alarming. As could his wife.

He knew that it was his fault, Hilda's drinking, because he had taught her to drink, and because he was not the husband she really needed. She was lonely when he was away, and lonely when he was home. But he could not worry about that too much. He had his own problems, after all.

He never seriously expected that he would go to Mars. There were too many with many better credentials. But there was a glamour attached to the project, and a good salary, and there were few enough other job opportunities.

It had not even been certain that the project would get off the ground, the economic situation being graver each year. But it was one more way of priming an increasingly rusty pump, and in a time of growing troubles, it

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was thought of as an important morale builder.

As the date of the mission approached, he found himself unexpectedly propelled into the ranks of the front-runners. One candidate developed a heart murmur; another was in a bad traffic accident; still another was belatedly pulled as a security risk. And in the end, he was selected.

She had told him he would go, of course, years before, that weird singer. He did not remember much about their time together, but he remembered that much.

He had met her at a party that the Agency threw to whip up interest in the mission. He had not been himself that night. He had fought with Hilda on the way out to the Space Center, about her drinking, and how she should be careful not to embarrass him. She had screamed at him, calling him terrible names she must have picked up from her new buddies in the cocktail bars.

He was furious by the time they got to the party. He had begun to drink methodically, throwing back one neat scotch after another. He had felt nothing but contempt for the politicians and the rock musicians and the vid stars and the hack science fiction writers clustering around him. Let them go up there, he thought. Let them strap themselves on top of a rocket and go see what it was really like.

"It's all a show," he started to tell a junior congressman, before an Agency flack pulled him away. "A big fucking show. Bread and circuses, right?"

He realized that he was behaving badly, and that if he continued to do so, they might throw him off the team. Perhaps this was what he wanted, but he was not prepared to admit it to himself. And so he had started a harmless flirtation with the singer. And then she had been swarming all over him.

There was a certain sort of woman who pursued astronauts, but she was not like them at all, and he was both flattered and puzzled by her attentions. He had heard her music now and again on the car radio. He did not care for it much, but he knew that she was very popular and successful.

She was good-looking enough, in a cold sort of way. But there was something a little spooky about her, as if she weren't quite there, as if she were somewhere else at the same time.

"You're the folksinger, right?" he said. "I just love folksinging.

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Oooooowoo, if I had a hammer. . . ."

And then, one or two drinks later, he made his move. "It's getting crowded in here. Would you like to take a walk? I could show you around the Center a little."

"Why don't we go back to my hotel?"

He had thought about that for a moment, glancing back toward the table where the astronauts' wives had gathered, where Hilda was presumably sitting. But he was drunk enough not to care too much about the consequences.

They had gone back to her hotel room. And after that, things had gotten a little fuzzy. He must have been drunker than he thought, because when he woke up the next day, he could not even remember boffing her. Usually he would remember a thing like that.

He could recall arriving at her suite and being impressed by its opulence. They had sat on the couch and begun to make out. But after that, he remembered nothing until he woke up the next morning, stretched out almost fully clothed on the bed, with the singer sitting by the dressing table brushing her hair.

Well, not absolutely nothing. He did seem to recollect having a fleeting sense, as he sat on the couch with the singer, that someone else was in the room, flickering faintly at the edge of his vision. He had turned his head to get a better look. And then what? He didn't know. The memory was just too slippery; he could not get a grip on it. In truth, he did not want to.

He had got out of that hotel room as quickly as he could. But before he left, she told him that he would be going to Mars.

"Have a good trip," she said as he was leaving.

"Trip?"

"To Mars."

"It hasn't been decided who's going to go."

"You'll go."

She had said it with absolute certainty. And in the end, she was right. Later he would sometimes wonder how she could have known. But for the most part, he tried not to think about the entire episode.

He knew enough about alcoholism to deduce that he had experienced some kind of blackout in the singer's hotel room. And he knew that blackouts were very bad news. After that night, he had stopped drinking,

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cold turkey. All by himself, no bullshitting around with AA or the Agency headshrinkers. For a while, he was very proud of himself.

If it was not a breeze, the yearlong flight out from Earth, it was not quite as bad as Denning had feared.

In the close confines of the cabin, he found it increasingly difficult to sustain the illusion that he and Wyatt were friends. And there were times when he felt like killing Fuller. But there were ways of escaping them, escaping to his bunk to work on his chess puzzles, or paging through the mystery novels that Control had thoughtfully dumped into the ship's computer.

It was more difficult to escape Control, with their routine check-ins and their equally routine media circuses in which the astronauts would talk to the president or to their wives and children. Denning was not sure what was worse, talking to Hilda or talking to the president. As the ship moved farther from Earth, and the time lapse on these communications increased, these rituals became ever more strained and artificial, until they were discontinued entirely in favor of tapes.

They still got the news from Earth. And even heavily edited as it must have been, the news was clearly not good. The economic situation was terrible, and the international situation was terrible. The cities were armed camps; there were psychos everywhere; the crime was running even further out of control. But somehow it was hard to get very excited about any of that; it was all so long ago and far away.

Perhaps he should have figured out earlier what was happening to Wyatt. The mission commander seemed normal enough most of the time, but he was spending an awful lot of time outside the ship. Any possible excuse and he would be out there, adjusting the telescope, taking readings, examining structural degradation. They were supposed to take turns, but early on, Wyatt had asked if he could go instead of Denning.

"I love it out there," he had said. "Looking on God's handiwork. I just love it."

Denning had agreed readily enough. He had absolutely no desire to go out there if he did not have to. And the farther they moved away from Earth, the more he feared the vast emptiness that was swallowing them up.

It was pretty much an anticlimax, actually getting there. They left the

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mother ship in its preprogrammed orbit around Mars, and Wyatt guided the lander down smoothly.

Denning was the second man out onto the surface, carrying the vidcam. Wyatt, of course, was first, and he had the flag. "We made it," he said as he stepped out onto that sandy plain. "Thank you, Lord."

"Was that in the script?" Denning asked, curious.

"There is no script," Wyatt said. "Now shut up; we're transmitting."

"They'll be editing," Denning said. "What's another thirty-second time delay?"

As Wyatt planted the flag in the ancient dust, Denning felt an almost overpowering urge to giggle. It all seemed absurd suddenly.

"Well," he said. "I guess we can go home now."

"Shut up," Wyatt said again.

"Yeah," Fuller said from behind him. "Try and be a little dignified, for chrissakes."

Fuller was angry because he was third man out of the lander. Control had set down the order on a seniority basis. As if Denning gave a shit.

"Marvelous stuff," Control said hours later, after they had pitched camp for the night. They said this on the open channel. And on the other channel, the closed one: "What the fuck's the matter with Denning?"

He was a long way from Control, but he was still afraid of what they could do to him when he returned.

"I'm sorry," he said over the coded channel. "Just a little clowning around. It won't happen again."

In retrospect, this, too, would seem comical.

There was a great deal of work to do, much of it very hard work. At first, Denning almost enjoyed it. It kept his mind off where they were and how far they were from home. But after a while, it really began to get to him.

It was cold, this planet, most of the time, colder than Antarctica, and just as bleak in its own way. But the worst of it was that it was so empty, so completely empty.

Sure, there were mountains, lots of mountains that had once been volcanoes. There were gullies that had been river valleys when there had still been running water here, before the volcanoes had died and the carbon dioxide had thinned out and the water had frozen into the ground.

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But that was just scenery. No matter how hard they looked, even trekking up to the pole to drill into the ice, they could find nothing living on this planet, not a single microbe. Nor was there any evidence that anything had ever lived here. It was so empty and dead, this world, it made his hometown feel like Manhattan.

Day by day, he felt the emptiness and the deadness seeping into him, filling him up. In his dreams, he would stand out there in the dust and scream and yet be unable to hear his own voice. Later, when Fuller began to make a point of sleeping with earplugs, Denning realized that he must be screaming in his sleep.

His dreams were bad, and his appetite was poor, and his hands would sometimes shake uncontrollably. He no longer believed that he would ever make it back to Earth. It was just too far, impossibly far. He was sure that he was going to crack. And yet it was Wyatt who cracked instead.

In the beginning, Wyatt had been commanding, driving them on relentlessly to build the base dome and to move through the endless sequence of other tasks that Control had set them.

At night, as Denning slumped exhausted onto his cot, drifting rapidly into sleep, he would hear Wyatt still awake, praying loudly. And in the morning when he awoke, Wyatt would already be up, pacing about in anticipation of the day's tasks. In retrospect, Denning would realize that there was something manic about the way Wyatt drove himself and drove them. But at the time, he was too fatigued and numb to think much about it.

Wyatt sustained this grueling pace for several months, the strain only occasionally evident in a twitching facial nerve, an unexpected burst of temper. And then he went mad.

"There were Martians," he told Denning and Fuller one evening over their final ration of the day.

He said this in a conversational tone, as though remarking on the weather, so that it took a moment for them to understand what they had heard.

"What?" Fuller said. "What did you say?"

"I said, there were Martians."

"You found something?" Denning asked, thinking of the tests that Wyatt had been running that day on the latest batch of soil samples. "You actually found something?"

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"There were Martians," Wyatt said again, shouting now. "Are you people listening to me? I'm not talking about microbes; I'm not talking about lichen. I'm telling you *there were Martians.*" And then, more calmly: "Until we killed them, of course."

"Killed them?" Denning echoed, appalled.

"By coming here," Wyatt said. "We killed them by coming here. Before we came, there were Martians, all right. Old, fantastically old and wise creatures, living in ancient cities with narrow, winding streets, fishing in the mighty canals. And Jesus Christ our Lord lived here among them, and he blessed them, and he baptized them in the shining waters of the canals .... There were Martians. Until we came here and made them like they never existed."

Denning saw Fuller get up from the table and move toward the medicine chest. Wyatt paid him no attention.

"Mike," Denning said tentatively. "I read Burroughs, too, when I was a kid; I read Bradbury, all that stuff. It's a shame it isn't the way they said it would be. But that's nothing to do with us. You've been pushing yourself too hard. . . ."

"We killed them," Wyatt said flatly. "We made them dead. We made them like they never had been. And all that was left was the emptiness; that's all that was left."

He began to cry then, in great racking sobs. He did not resist, or even look up, when Fuller jabbed him through his shirtsleeve with a needle. He cried for a few minutes more. And then he put his head down in his arms and began to snore.

"Should we call this in?" Denning asked after they had dragged Wyatt to his cot. "Should we tell Control now?"

"There's nothing Control can do for us, or for him," Fuller said. "Let's get some sleep. We'll deal with this in the morning."

But in the morning, Wyatt was gone.

III

FROM THE patio of the main house, Duke watched Murray Snow emerge from the guest cottage and head off toward the cliffs. The psychoanalyst had a book in his hand and binoculars around his neck. He walked stiffly, arthritically.

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Bird-watching again. You could set your watch by it. Snow, Duke knew, would return in good time for his late-afternoon session with Martha. You could set your watch by that, too.

Like clockwork, he thought. The clockwork shrink. Wind him up and let him dance through your head.

He wondered again what Snow was saying about him to Martha. Surely nothing good.

He had felt the psychiatrist appraising him at dinner, the night of his arrival in Corfu. And he had failed the exam.

The conversation had run through the usual subjects: the situation at home (getting worse), the Mental Health Administration (Snow was an admirer), the Balkan Wars (unlikely to affect Greece, unless Albania got drawn in), piracy in the Mediterranean (not a problem in inshore waters). And then the talk had turned to the past. Snow sat still as a statue while Duke and Martha swapped old road stories.

"So I told the promoter, either the guys in the band get *green* fudgicles, the way it says in the contract, or there's no show. Purple and orange, forget it. . . ."

Martha had roared with laughter at him, at the way he had once been. "Crazy times," she said.

"I guess you're well out of it."

"For the moment."

"For the moment? You're thinking about going back?"

"Oh sure. Sure I'll go back. At the right time."

"I suppose in a few years, when Daniel is older, things will be easier."

"Oh no," Martha said. "It will be sooner than that."

Snow frowned. "You should think about this carefully," he told Martha. "You have to be sure you're ready to handle it."

"I'm not fragile, Murray. I'm not going to break."

"It could be dangerous in other ways," Snow said. "Back home, it's like a giant time bomb waiting to explode. People are highly aroused, ready to flare up at the slightest cue. And you excite people, Martha; some of them are not terribly stable to begin with. It would take only one. . . ." He trailed off, unwilling to complete the thought.

"To do what?" Martha asked. "Kill me, you mean? That was always a risk."

"It's an even greater risk now."

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"Perhaps. But then, perhaps the music will help calm people down."

"I admire your work, Martha. But you have to admit that it hasn't made that kind of difference."

"I'm not talking about my old songs, Murray. I'm talking about the new music, the songs I'm *going* to write."

"You're working on something?" Duke asked.

"No," she said. "Not yet. I don't hear the new songs yet. Just the occasional snatch. But it sounds like quiet music. Real quiet and soothing."

Duke was struck by the way she talked about her songwriting, as though it were simply a matter of tuning in to some radio inside her head.

"Even a whisper," Snow said, "can be a shout. In the wrong ears." He turned to Duke. "I hope you won't encourage her in this foolishness, Robert."

"Martha will do what Martha will do," Duke had said. "I don't think either of us can hope to persuade her either way." And right there he had made an enemy of the psychoanalyst.

Snow could see him only as a bad influence on Martha: a living reminder of her wild past, a threat to her carefully won equilibrium, a harbinger of a dangerous future. And no doubt he had told Martha as much.

But if Snow were indeed trying to undermine Duke's relationship with Martha, so far his efforts had been unsuccessful. If anything, Martha seemed more affectionate, more attached to him than ever.

"Robert." She smiled at him now from across the lunch table. "I'm going into town with Rosie to pick up a few things. Would you mind watching Daniel for a few hours? He doesn't want to come."

"What about Leila?"

Leila was the woman who came in from the nearby village to cook and clean and, occasionally, baby-sit Daniel.

"Leila has to leave early; she has a family emergency. If it's a problem, I could ask Rosie to stay. . . ."

Someone is going to die here. Maybe it's you. It was more than a week since Daniel had made his predictions. Duke had still not mentioned it to Martha. It was something that he and the boy would have to work out between themselves. Although so far, he had made no effort to work things out. So far, he had dealt with his discomfort by avoiding the boy as

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far as possible.

"No," he said. "That's O.K. It's no problem."

Martha and Rosie drove off in the Range Rover, with Martha's bodyguard, Gus, following in his Jeep. Duke went to check on Daniel. He found the boy in his room, sitting among a clutter of toys, deep in conversation with a small, flat metal box. "Rosie is going nuts," he was saying.

"Nuts," echoed the machine. "I hear you telling me that Rosie is going nuts. What makes you say that?"

"She think's she's Mummy," the boy said. "She thinks I'm *her* son. . . ."

He looked up then and saw Duke in the doorway.

"What do you have there, Daniel?" Duke asked.

"Talkie. Mummy got it from a catalog." The boy turned the toy over so that Duke could see the vid display, touching the screen to make it light up with fast-shifting colored shapes and lines. "This is a weather program. I'm studying weather."

"Why is it called a Talkie?"

"Tell the man," Daniel said to the box.

"Because I talk," the box said in a startlingly deep voice. "I am programmed to recognize over twenty thousand words, and to make appropriate conversational responses."

"Quite a gadget."

"It's not so smart. There's plenty of stuff it can't answer." He put the box down and looked at Duke expectantly.

"I came to tell you that Mummy and Rosie went into town," Duke said.

"I know that."

"Well, if you want anything, just call."

Duke turned to leave. But he was surprised to hear the boy call after him. "I want to go for a walk."

"Where?" Duke asked.

"Along the cliffs," the boy said. "I like walking along the cliffs."

Around the headland from Martha's property, there were steep cliffs, with a sheer drop to the waters some two hundred feet below. Duke never walked there. He had a mild phobia about heights, but he was not about to admit that to the boy.

"Are you allowed to walk along there?"

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"Sure. Sure I'm allowed."

"What were you saying about Rosie?" Duke asked. "When I came in?"

They were strolling along the cliff path and watching the sea gulls wheeling in the sky. Duke was walking on the outside of the boy, beside the cliff edge. He felt comfortable enough as long as he didn't look down.

"Nothing."

"You like Rosie, don't you?"

"Rosie is Rosie," the boy said. "She can't be anyone else."

Duke pondered this gnomic response. True as far as it went. But who *was* Rosie, really? Even Rosie didn't seem sure.

Rosie had been Martha's fan, and then Daniel's baby-sitter. Gradually, she had become part of the family. Rosie could be extremely animated in Martha's presence, chattering away endlessly. And with Daniel, she could be cloyingly affectionate. But removed from Martha and her son, a kind of flatness would seem to creep over her, as though she did not really exist in those moments spent away from them.

Duke found her spooky, particularly when she dressed up like Martha.

"You know what?" the boy asked suddenly.

"What?"

"You could die. If you fell off this cliff. I bet you could die."

Duke glanced down uneasily to the waters crashing on the rocks below. "Probably. Except, I'm not going to fall."

"I could push you. When you're not expecting it."

Duke looked searchingly at the boy. The boy's expression did not seem hostile, only earnestly interested in his response.

"I don't like that," Duke said. "I don't like you threatening me."

"I didn't say I *would* push you. I only said I *could*."

Duke stopped walking. "That's enough. We're going back to the house."

"I don't want to go back. I want to walk some more."

"I don't care what you want. We're going back."

"No." the boy said. "Won't."

Duke reached out to grab Daniel's arm, but he jumped out of reach.

"All right. Stay, if you like. But I'm going back to the house." He turned to leave.

"You can't," the boy said. "I'm not allowed out here by myself. You're supposed to be looking after me."

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Duke hesitated.

"You can't leave me here," the boy said. "Suppose I slipped and fell off the edge? Suppose I jumped?"

"You wouldn't do that," Duke said, his mouth dry. "You wouldn't do a stupid thing like that."

"I might. I might not."

Someone is going to die here, Duke thought. Suddenly he believed it. Someone was going to die. Maybe the boy, maybe himself. The boy could see the future. Or else he was going to make it happen.

Again Duke grabbed for the boy. Again the boy evaded him easily. He pivoted away and came to a halt inches from the cliff edge. He stood there, teetering dangerously. "You can't catch me," he said. "Not in a million years."

He turned and raced off down the path, weaving close to the edge of the cliff.

"Wait," Duke said. "Stop."

He gave chase, but the boy was too quick. The gap between them contined to lengthen. He followed doggedly, keeping his eyes on the path and away from the waters beneath.

Far ahead the boy stopped and turned to watch him. "Faster," the boy shouted. "Faster."

Duke increased his pace. And moments later caught his foot in a buried tree root. He felt himself hurtling through the air, arms flailing, toward the cliff edge.

This is it, he thought. *This is really it.*

And then his hand clutched around the branches of a bush growing on the side of the path. The bush cut his hand, but he held on, his legs dangling halfway over the edge of the cliff.

He pulled himself back up onto the path. He lay on the ground, staring down at the water, imagining himself lying broken on the rocks below.

He looked up to see Daniel standing over him. "It's all right," the boy said, his tone almost solicitous. "I was only kidding. You're not going to die. Not today, anyway."

Duke got up and dusted himself off, and they walked in silence back to the house.

* * *

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IV

IT WAS Denning who found the body. He picked up Wyatt's footprints and followed them into a cave in the wall of a dry river valley. And there was the mission commander, sitting with his back to the wall of the cave, eyes staring sightlessly ahead of him.

The cave was no more than half an hour's walk from the camp. And even if Wyatt had lost his bearings completely, his suit radio was still working. But he had made no attempt to contact them. He had just sat there in that cave, staring at the wall, until his oxygen ran out.

It was not a very interesting cave, hardly tall enough to stand up in, and only some five meters deep. Denning could think of no reason why Wyatt would have wanted to go in there. Denning stood there, the light from his helmet playing down on Wyatt, trying to understand what had happened. And then he turned to look at what Wyatt had been staring at on the cave wall.

A series of fine cracks ran through the rock, forming an intricate hieroglyphic pattern almost like a circuit diagram. Denning stepped forward to get a closer look at this curious weathering effect. And there was a flickering at the corners of his eyes, a strangely familiar flickering....

The cave wall vanished. He found himself looking out over the river valley. Except that there was water rushing over the dusty riverbed now, and plants and trees and wild grass covering the slopes. And a few miles down the river sailed a squarish, brightly colored barge, with great white sails flapping in the wind. In the distance, he could see a city on the hill, its delicate, oddly tilted crystalline towers reaching toward a dazzling blue sky.

"What the hell?" he said.

Then he noticed the Martian climbing up the slope toward him. It was tall, standing perhaps two feet taller than Denning. Its face was blue, but otherwise humanoid, with large, sad-looking eyes. Each of its hands terminated in six long, tapering fingers.

"Welcome, Brother," the Martian said in accentless English.

Denning giggled. "Oh come on," he said. "Come *on*."

The Martian eyed him calmly.

"You don't seriously expect me to buy this?" Denning asked. "Blue men? Cities? Canals?"

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"It's a river," the Martian said. "But if you like, we can see some canals."

"This is a hallucination, right? Got to be oxygen starvation." He glanced at the readout on his wrist. It showed almost a full tank. But of course, it *would* do that, if he were hallucinating.

"Actually, you have no need of that helmet."

"If it's all the same to you, I'll keep it on."

"As you like."

I'm dying, Denning thought. Maybe I'm dead.

"Where am I? Heaven?"

"Mars."

"Oh sure. Sure it is. The Agency will be madder than hell that I forgot to bring my vidcam."

"Your instruments would not *see*. You can."

"Then why didn't I see before?"

"Because you have cut yourself off from your own vision. Because you perceive only what you can measure and anatomize. You have exiled yourself into a dim, dull, confusing world. A world of matter and energy, but no spirit. Look."

And for a moment, Denning saw. He saw all the way through. And there was no Martian, no river, no trees, no barge. But there was no cave, either. There was only light. Waves of brilliant light everywhere.

"What?" he said, blinking at the glare. "What is this?"

"Some call it the noosphere," the Martian said as the light faded as suddenly as it had come. Except, now he could see that it wasn't a Martian. It was Mike Wyatt.

Wyatt was sitting cross-legged on the ground, chewing a blade of grass. He was wearing cutoff jeans and a T-shirt. Of course, Wyatt wouldn't need a space suit anymore. Seeing that he was dead.

Looking beyond Wyatt, Denning could see that the barge was back on the river, and the city of tilting towers once again stood on the hill.

"The what?"

"The primordial light of Creation," Wyatt said. "The consciousness distributed throughout matter. Trapped there. Until apocatastasis."

"Apocatastasis?"

"The revelation of all secrets. The restitution of matter to the divine, bringing with it the accumulation of all knowledge. The Jews, they called it *tikkun*." Wyatt sucked meditatively on his piece of grass. "I used to read

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all that stuff back on Earth. But it was only words. I didn't really *see*."

"You're dead, Mike."

"Yep," Wyatt agreed. "Only, you need to talk to me. The Martian didn't do it for you. Worked for me, but I guess you're more of a skeptic."

"I'm hallucinating, Mike. You're not really here. I don't believe in Martians, and I don't believe in life after death."

"As you like."

"You're trying to tell me all this is real?" He indicated the river, the barge, the city.

"It's all real, Jake. And all unreal."

"What's happening to me?"

"You saw, Jake. You looked into the aleph, and you saw. And you're still seeing."

"Aleph?"

"On the cave wall. It's a gateway, Jake. A gateway to everything, everywhere, every time. I looked into it, and I couldn't make myself look away."

"Until you died."

"I died, yes. But you can still access me. I'm still in here. Everything is in here."

"But how did this aleph thing get into this cave?"

Wyatt shrugged. "Does it matter? Perhaps it was always here. Or perhaps someone put it in here for us. Knowing we would eventally come here in desperation."

"Put it here? What are you talking about? Aliens?"

"Could have been aliens. Martians, even. Or maybe it was angels. But that's not exactly the point."

"And what did you mean, 'in desperation'?"

"We *were* desperate, Jake, all of us. We were at an end of something, and we knew it. An end to living with our machines, analyzing and destroying everything we touch. Living as tiny, isolated specks of consciousness, every man and woman his own astronaut, cocooned in our own technology. Cut off from the world, from other people, from ourselves. And lonely, so very lonely. We knew there had to be an end to it, but we couldn't face that. So we just kept pushing on. All the way to Mars."

"That's not why we came," Denning said. And thought: *I'm arguing with a hallucination.* "We came here to explore. People have always

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explored, always pushed back the boundaries. . . ."

"Bullshit, Jake. People have always tried to escape. That's all they ever wanted to do. But you can run only so far. And this is it. This is the end of the line. Just look inside the aleph. The aleph knows everything."

"But what's it for?"

"Like I told you, it's a gateway. And now it's inside you, Jake. You're the gateway. The gateway for the light. . . ."

And then Denning was back in the cave, staring at a pattern on the wall, and Fuller was screaming into his earphones.

"Denning, where the fuck are you? Denning, will you come in, please?"

And it was gone, all of it: the river, the barge, the Martian, the light, Wyatt. . . . It was all gone. He tore his eyes away from the pattern on the wall, and he acknowledged the call, and Fuller came to help him with the body.

They carried Wyatt out of the cave, and they buried him outside the base dome. They used the flagpole to mark the spot. The flag itself had been ripped apart in the sandstorm.

The flagpole would blow away a few weeks later, and then they would no longer know exactly where Wyatt was. But by then it would no longer seem a matter of much importance.

"What the fuck did he think he was doing out there, anyway?" Fuller asked as they stood by the makeshift grave.

"Looking for Martians, I guess," Denning said.

They lied to Control about Wyatt's death. It was Denning who thought up the cover story. It came into his mind all in one piece. "We could say there was a rockslide. Like when we were scrambling up the side of that valley. We haven't transmitted the footage from that one yet."

"Why?" Fuller asked. "Why should we do that?"

"Because it's the decent thing to do, of course, for Mike and. . . ." He could not recall the name of Mike's wife, but the principle was correct in any case. "For Mike and his family. To preserve his memory. That's the sort of thing friends do for each other."

"I don't give a flying fuck about preserving Mike's memory."

"What's the point of telling them he went mad?" Denning persisted. "Nobody is going to want to hear that. It'll be very bad PR for the Agency. They'll just take it out on us. They'll say it was our fault, letting him wander off like that."

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Fuller considered. "Makes sense."

"A rockslide," Denning said. "Struck down tragically in his prime."

"All right," Fuller said. "I could go with that."

And so they faked the report. And for a while, it made Denning glad, thinking about the thing he had done for Mike and for his wife, whatever her name was. They had been good friends, after all; they had spent many happy hours together.

V

WHEN DUKE drove into town to collect his mail, he found Matt Parker leaning against the wall of the post office, reading the Eurosat edition of the *New York Times.*

Parker folded up his newspaper. "Too bad about the Mars thing," he said.

"What?"

Parker opened the paper again and showed him the front page: *Mission Commander Dead in Freak Accident.*

"Accidents happen," Parker said. "Particularly with inadequate preparation. They shouldn't have rushed into this Mars thing. But they thought it was going to be one hell of a morale booster.... You O.K. Robert? You look a little pale."

"What? Yeah, I'm fine."

He's not coming back. That was what the boy had said. *I know it.*

But Parker was right: accidents happened. This was just coincidence. Had to be coincidence. He forced his attention back to the moment.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Let's go get a drink."

They found a tavern in the square, and Parker ordered them ouzo.

"Well?" Duke asked after the waiter had brought their drinks. "What do you want?"

"I want Martha to make a comeback. You know that. But there's something else we have to discuss."

Parker reached into his jacket and produced his wallet. He flipped it open to display an identification card with an eagle hologram. Duke studied the credentials. They looked legitimate, although he had never heard of the National Morale Bureau. Lately there had been a proliferation

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of new government agencies, each attacking the ongoing crisis from some new angle.

"So you're not with RealTime at all."

"Yes, I am. Special assignment, full signing authority. Our deal still stands, Robert, if you were worrying about that."

"I'm not interested in your deal. Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

"We didn't think you'd cooperate."

"With the government? You bet I wouldn't cooperate. But what interest could the government have in Martha?"

"A sizable one," Parker said. "Martha has been a big help to us in the past, and we could use some more of that help right now. These are difficult times, Robert. What with the unemployment, and the rioting, and the increased incidence of mental disorder, and so on and so forth."

He seemed bored, reciting this wretched litany.

"Martha helped to cool out some of the craziness. She kept millions of kids dreaming away their lives, waiting for the end of the world. But she's been away an awfully long time. There's a lot of restlessness out there now, a lot of hunger, waiting to focus around something. We were hoping that somebody new might emerge, but it simply hasn't happened. What people want is Martha. And what they want, they have to get."

"Why?"

In answer, Parker clapped his hands together. "Kaboom. Or so our sociotech boys project. Unless we get Martha back, we're going to have ourselves some disturbances that make the ones we have now look like a tea party."

Duke shook his head. "You guys must be really desperate. To pin your hopes on a *singer*."

"You of all people shouldn't discount the power of music, Robert. You know, back in the Middle Ages, everyone sang together. Right across Europe, in every church, the same hymns at the same time. They knew something we've forgotten. Music is a way of tuning society. If you don't tune it right, everything falls apart."

"And you think Martha can tune it for you?"

"It's worth a shot, certainly. We're running out of options. MenHealth can't keep the lid on anymore; the Mars thing blew up in our faces. . . . We have to try *something*."

"You came here to tell me this?"

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Parker drained the remains of his drink. "No," he said. "I came here because we need your help. Someone is planning to kill Martha. MenHealth."

"You're telling me that a government agency is planning to kill someone?"

"It wouldn't be the first time."

Duke shook his head in bewilderment. "But why would they want to kill Martha?"

"They've always viewed Martha as a disturbing influence on their clientele. And they're terrified that she's going to come back; they think her fans are going to go absolutely apeshit. So they're willing to take drastic measures. These MenHealth types think of themselves as psycho-surgeons operating on the mass psyche. For them, Martha is a growth that needs to be cut out."

"Wait a minute," Duke said. "I thought you just told me that you government guys were her biggest fans."

"Interagency disagreement. At NatMorale, we're right behind Martha. But MenHealth . . . bunch of jumped-up social workers, they can't even read their own survey data."

"And this fight over Martha is some kind of turf war."

"Yeah, it's war," Parker said. "And they're winning. Menhealth has the clout these days. The politicians are real big on MenHealth; they can't think of anything better to do."

"And you've been using us to play your little games."

"Big game, Robert," Parker said quietly. "Real big."

"I don't believe this," Duke said. "You wanted me to help you bring Martha back so that MenHealth could shoot her down?"

"Obviously, we thought the risk could be contained. We still think that. That's why I'm here."

"And you expect me to help you now?"

"I expect you to help Martha. We can fight about the rest of it later."

"I don't get it," Duke said. "Why would they try to kill Martha now? After all this time?"

"To stop her from coming back. They know we've been working toward that goal. And now they know we're succeeding. Martha is planning to come back real soon."

"She hasn't said anything to me about a comeback."

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"But she has to Murray Snow. And MenHealth knows it because they're getting copies of Snow's case notes. They've got a hot line right into her head."

"How would they get Snow's notes?"

"Obviously, they have someone right there in Martha's household. A sleeper. Someone well positioned both to monitor Martha, and to take the necessary action when the time comes."

"In Martha's household? Who?"

"We have our suspicions. But we don't know for sure."

"You think it's Rosie? Gus?"

"Rosie Marchand?" Parker glanced upward as though visualizing her file. "Very unstable type. Two suicide attempts before the age of twenty. Poor self-image, weak reality adaptation, perfect raw material in the right hands. Sure, it could be Rosie. Could be Gus the bodyguard, for that matter. But our bet is on Snow."

"Snow? That's crazy. Snow is trying to help her."

"With her creative block, you mean? The way they're going, could be he's just piling up more rocks."

"Why would he want to keep her blocked?"

"No reason, unless he's working for MenHealth. It makes a lot of sense when you think about it. Snow moves in the same circles as the MenHealth boys. And he's in an excellent position to give them what they want."

"Shouldn't we warn Martha?"

"No, not yet. That could force their hand. We have to wait until we know for sure. That's where you come into this."

"Me? What can I do?"

"Keep your eyes open. Try to spot the sleeper before they make a move. You can call this number for backup when the time comes." He passed over a card.

"One more thing," Parker said. "For whatever it's worth. We found out what Snow is treating Martha for. It's more than just creative block. Seems she's suffering from amnesia."

"Amnesia? Her memory seems pretty good to me."

"It's more complicated than that. You see, she's forgotten the future."

* * *

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VI

UNTIL SHE was nearly six years old, her life was ordinary enough. She went to school, she played with her friends, she loved her parents, and sometimes she hated her little brother. And the future was as much a mystery to her as to everyone else.

And then it changed. It changed the day she saw the dark man outside the schoolyard. He was peering in through the wire-mesh fence while she played with her friends, staring directly at her. He was a short man dressed in a dark-gray suit with a red tie. His hair was a little disheveled; his eyes were a little wild and scary. Even if his eyes had not been scary, she knew enough not to go near him, knew that strange men were to be avoided.

When Mrs. Roberts from next door came to pick up Martha, along with her own daughter Cheryl and Kenny from down the street, Martha stayed close to Mrs. Roberts the whole way home, clinging to her hand while the other children ran on ahead laughing and screaming, the way she usually did.

That night the dark man came to her house. She was in the kitchen, helping her little brother, Sam, finish his dinner. Peering out into the hallway as her mother opened the door, she could see that the man had combed his hair. Her mother stood aside to let him in. He was carrying a large book under one arm and holding a clipboard in the other.

"Who is that man, Mummy?" she asked as they came toward the kitchen. "I don't like him."

"Don't be silly, Martha," her mother said. "He's just a man selling encyclopedias."

"That's right, honey," the man said. "Books to make you as smart as you are pretty."

Up close, she could see that the man's eyes still looked funny, red-rimmed and empty and spooky.

And the man reached over and patted her on the head. "Learning new things," he said. "It doesn't hurt a bit."

It was a light touch, quickly removed. But it was enough. She felt the beginnings of a terrible headache.

"Mummy," she said. "I don't feel too good. Can I go to my room?"

She went into the bathroom first and spashed water on her head, but it

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didn't help. She undressed and got into bed and lay there listening to the murmur of voices in the kitchen below. She heard the man leave only a few minutes later. "I'm sorry," her mother told him at the door. "I wish we could afford it, but they're talking about more layoffs down at the plant, and we really have to be careful."

For hours after that, she lay awake, afraid that he would come back. But the dark man did not return that night. She would not see him again for many years.

Eventually, she fell into an exhausted sleep. When her mother woke her up for school, her headache was gone. But other things were different. Everything was different now, and always would be.

"What's the matter, Martha?" her mother asked, standing over her bed, staring alarmed into her wildly darting eyes. "Are you still feeling sick?" She reached over and felt Martha's forehead. "You're not hot or anything. What's the matter?"

"I . . .," Martha said. "I . . . I don't know."

She put her hands over her eyes, removed them again. She put her hands to her ears, took them away.

"It's awful," she told her mother. "I can't stand it. I can't stand to look at it. I can't stand to hear it."

"What's awful, dear?"

"The voices. The pictures. Make them stop. Please make them stop."

"I'll call the doctor," her mother said.

"It was that man who did this. The book man."

"He never touched you," her mother said. "Did he?"

"He filled my head with the pictures, with the voices. It was him. It was him."

She screamed then. And then she stopped talking. She stopped talking altogether, and would not respond to her mother's increasingly anxious inquiries. She did not talk again for almost a month.

It was very confusing at first, a chaos of words and images pressing down upon her, filling up her mind. And very frightening, too. It was a bit like watching TV and flipping from one channel to the next, and so on without end, everything blurring into one vast jumbled show. It was like watching TV, except that she couldn't turn off the set, and the picture had a yellowish tinge. And often it seemed that she was in the show herself, seeing and hearing these things, doing things that were familiar and

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things that were quite unfamiliar. Except that it wasn't *her* exactly.

Some of the scenes were quite ordinary, like running down a wintry street, or sitting at a kitchen table drinking coffee, or swimming in a huge azure pool. But her legs were incredibly long as she ran down the street, and she was too young to drink coffee, and it was no swimming pool she had ever seen.

Other scenes were really quite nice, like standing up on a stage and having people cheer her, or sailing in a great white boat under a warm sun, or eating wonderful foods in palacelike restaurants.

But there was much more that was simply mysterious to her, mysterious and scary. A city in flames all around her. A man in a space suit walking on the Moon, except that it wasn't exactly the Moon. And here and there the strange dark man, appearing and disappearing.

The visions raced on inside her head, and they had no end, and there was nothing she could do to stop them. And meanwhile, she could not speak; she could not begin to describe what was happening to her.

They took Martha away to the children's hospital in the nearest big city. They put her in the psychiatric ward. She stayed there for three months.

"Some sort of late-developing childhood schizophrenia," she heard the doctor tell her father.

Her mother stayed with her for the first week, but then she had to go home to look after Sam. Martha barely noticed her departure. Although the doctors and nurses were kind, she did not want to speak to them, either.

But she was learning, slowly, how to control the sights and sounds inside her head, how to switch them on and off almost at will. As she began to master this trick, the maelstrom in her mind became less scary, more bearable.

Within a month, she was able to speak to her parents when they came to visit, and to the doctors and nurses. She would talk, too, to the other children in the ward, those who would talk to her, although many wouldn't. Watching them sitting there, rocking themselves back and forth, she would wonder what they were seeing and hearing.

Now that she could talk, the doctors asked her many questions. In particular, they would ask about the man with the funny eyes, and what he had done to her. They asked the same questions over and over, as if

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they could not remember her answers from the time before.

"So he didn't touch you, except on the head?"

"No."

"But you were afraid he might touch you somewhere else."

"I was just afraid of him, that's all."

The doctors rarely asked about the words and pictures inside her head, and she never volunteered information about them. Certainly she never told them what she was beginning to suspect: that the person in those pictures was her, the way she was one day going to be.

Here she was, quite clearly, at seven or eight, only a little taller, her hair a little longer, examining herself in the washroom mirror at school, about to sing in some concert. And here she was again at maybe fourteen, much taller now, hair cut short, in her bedroom back home, sitting on the same old bed, although the walls were mauve now instead of pink, and covered with posters of pop stars. And here she was full-grown, up on stage in a long white dress, with thousands of people hanging on her every word.

She especially liked those parts of her life to come in which she would be a star, and live in an enormous house, and travel all around the world. She would run through these scenes in her mind again and again, listening in wonder to the music she would one day make, drinking in the acclaim of the crowd.

Somehow she knew not to tell the doctors about these strange waking dreams. And as she learned how to control her visions, as she became visibly calmer each day, the doctors began to treat her differently. She caught on, finally, to what they were thinking. They thought that she was getting better.

She realized, too, what they wanted of her, but would not ask directly.

"They stopped," she told one of the doctors one morning. "The pictures have stopped. The voices, too."

They discharged her the following week.

She discovered early on that while she could see the future, she could not change it, not in any significant detail. The events rolled on past her like a movie.

A few weeks after her return from the hospital, on a cold midwinter day, her best friend, Elaine, came over to play. They were up in her

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bedroom, putting Barbie through her paces, when she saw it. The edges of her field of vision seemed to blur and take on a yellowish tinge. The room faded from view. And she saw Elaine drowning.

It would happen on a warm summer's day. They would be at the swimming hole just outside town where they swam every summer. They would be laughing and playing, Martha and Elaine and a few other friends. She would turn her head just for a moment, and when she turned back, Elaine would be gone.

"Elaine?" she would shout. "Where's Elaine?"

Someone would see her then, under the water. They would dive down and pull her up. But by then, it would be too late.

"Elaine," she said as the vision faded.

"What?" Elaine asked, engrossed with the doll.

But somehow she could not bring herself to warn her friend. Elaine would not believe that Martha could see her dying, but she would be upset all the same. She would tell her parents, and they would tell Martha's parents, and they would take her back to the hospital in the big city.

Besides, she was not yet certain that she could see the future. Perhaps it would not happen at all, Elaine drowning. Or perhaps it would happen only if she talked about it.

But through the rest of that winter, she saw this same scene repeatedly, and each time she saw it, she felt the same black helplessness.

The summer came around, and the long vacation, and her friends would want to go swimming. And she would suggest doing something else, or else going to the public pool in town rather than the swimming hole. Sometimes they accepted her suggestions, but often they did not. And so they went to the swimming hole, and she went with them; somehow she could not refuse. They went swimming again and again, and Elaine did not drown, and Martha felt a growing sense of relief. Until one day, Elaine did drown.

That was the worst thing she saw for many years to come. But there were other bad things that she could not change. She saw her brother break his arm falling from a climbing frame in the playground, and then he did break it, despite her repeated warnings. She saw herself and her friends getting into trouble at school, letting the rabbit out of its cage and getting sent to the head teacher. She saw it, but she could not stop her friends from doing it, and she could not stop herself.

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She did well enough in high school to go on to college, except that people in her family did not go to college. When she left school at eighteen, she got a job in a local department store. There were still jobs to be found in those days.

She enjoyed being an ordinary person working in a store. She enjoyed having ordinary boyfriends with ordinarily futile ambitions. She knew she would not be ordinary much longer.

And then the last and greatest depression of the century hit home, and the department store closed, and so did the plant, and there were very few jobs of any kind available.

Soon afterward, she began to hear the songs in her head, the songs she would have to write. She had heard them before, but never with such sharpness or such urgency. She knew that it was time to begin the long road toward her destiny.

She moved to the city and began to sing in public, at first in tiny clubs. She hooked up with a manager and began her remarkable ascent. And it was the way she had seen it, in every detail. And when it happened, she could only take it calmly, as she took everything calmly.

Her success was no more than she had expected, and in some ways, it was less. She had anticipated all these events so long, turning them over and over and over again in her mind, that she had leached them of the emotions she might otherwise have experienced. She felt no great joy or sense of achievement. Only a certain puzzlement.

She was puzzled, in particular, by the devotion of her fans, for all that she had been expecting it. She understood the desperation of the times, and she knew that her music in some way provided people with release. But she did not really understand why that should be.

At the party in the Space Center in Houston, she met the dark man again, as she had known she would. Except that he was not yet that man, only an earlier, paler shadow of what he would become.

It was quite early in the party, but he was already very drunk. He was small and swarthy, like a coal miner in one of the D. H. Lawrence novels she had read in high school. In no way was she drawn to him. She was not even afraid of him.

He made his routine pass, and was clearly astonished when she took him up on it. They went back to her hotel room, and he kissed her clumsily,

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his mouth sour with alcohol. And then the thing that she expected happened, the thing that she had previewed many times, but still did not quite understand. There was a strange kind of flickering light in the corner of her eyes. And suddenly the dark man was in her room, and the other, the earlier shadow of him, was gone.

"Hello, Martha, he said.

His eyes were still funny and empty, but she was not afraid of him anymore.

In the morning, he was gone, and the other was back in his place.

Before the astronaut left, she told him that he would go to Mars, although not what he would find there. She was not very clear on that point herself.

Her child, Daniel, was born. And even as she lay on the delivery table with the baby in her arms, she realized that the visions were gone. It was as if a curtain had been drawn down over the future.

She had expected this, too. She had always known that there would be a time during which she could no longer see. But it did not make it any less shocking.

She was left only with scattered memories of the times to come: A house on an island where she would live in seclusion from the world. Meeting up again with Robert Duke, backstage in a shabby little theater in Montreal. Recording a song she had yet to write.

But these memories of the future were curiously hazy. And in time, just like her ordinary memories, they began to fade. She suspected that she was making them fade, that there were things that she no longer wished to remember because she was no longer prepared to deal with them.

Her own death, for example. Had she been able to see that before? She could no longer recall. Before, it would have been an abstraction. But now, as she held the baby in her arms, she could not stand to think about how little time remained before the end: the end of everything old, but even before that, her own end. She could not bear the thought of being separated from her child.

The songs stopped coming to her, too. She knew that there would still be other songs that she would sing. But she could no longer hear them.

There had been times when she wished to be like everyone else, blind

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to the future. But it was a painful adjustment all the same. She fell into a depression. On the advice of a friend, she went to see a psychiatrist.

She told Murray Snow everything, and he believed almost none of it. But he was willing to listen to her, and to work with her to regain her creativity. It was nice, finally, to have someone she could talk to.

The child was as great a joy as she had known he would be. But he frightened her, too, the more so as he got older. When he was two years old, he told her, "Mummy, I'm going to fall down the stairs tomorrow. And I'm going to bang my head. And I'm going to cry." The next day, he did fall down the stairs. And she knew that her child had something of her former talent. It was as if it had passed directly to him, like some strange birthright.

His talent frightened her, exactly the same way her own talent would have frightened other people if she had not usually been careful to conceal it. Her son could see her future, and she could not. But he never told her what he saw, and she never asked him about it.

Following Daniel's birth, she allowed her career to slowly wind down. She played less each year, recorded less. Finally she stopped altogether.

She met Robert Duke again in Montreal one cold winter night, and she invited him to visit her in Corfu. And for a while, they were happy together. All the more so for the fact that her memories of this interlude were so dim that he could and did surprise her.

VII

FROM THE patio, Duke watched Murray Snow emerge from his cottage and set off toward the cliff path. He waited until the psychiatrist disappeared over the horizon. Then he strolled toward the cottage. The door opened to his touch.

Snow's living room was set up as an office. There was big desktop supported by filing cabinets in front of the window, with a small computer terminal and printer, and a cellular fax. There was also a small pile of brown manila file folders. The top file was labeled *Psychological Origins of the Disturbances. Chapter One.*

Snow's client records were in the filing cabinet. The files of Martha N. took up half a drawer. The first to come to hand was labeled *Martha N.: 1995.* He flipped it open.

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October 7, 1995, he read, in Snow's tiny, meticulous handwriting. *Tentative diagnosis: dissociative reaction, with etiology in early-childhood sexual abuse (note: the "dark man" may be a screen memory concealing her father . . . explore further), giving rise to two "Marthas": one a self-described "normal person," and another who could "see the future." In some ways akin to the classic multiple-personality disorder, except that the two coexisted in full knowledge of each other.*

The second Martha, the one associated with her creative gifts, has now fallen silent. Subject believes that she will not recapture her creativity until she can again access her supposed psychic powers.

The construction of the second Martha represents the working out of an elaborate set of defense mechanisms developed in response to the damage sustained to her self-concept in early childhood. It is surely no coincidence that the second Martha fell silent with the birth of the child. The assumption of her role as a mother has permitted the original, or primary, Martha to reaffirm her feminine identity and at last set aside her defenses. In essence, she has healed herself, although she is as yet unwilling to accept a cure that leaves her bereft of her creative powers.

This analysis would suggest that Martha may never sing again. Perhaps this would not be such a bad thing. Although I enjoy certain aspects of her music, I find its overall tone depressing in the extreme. Moreover, its widespread popular acceptance reflects and stimulates an extremely unhealthy mood among the youth of this country.

Duke closed the file. So it was true, what Parker had told him: Martha had come to believe what her fans kept telling her, that she could see the future. Except, when she tried to, she couldn't. And so she had rushed off to Murray Snow. Run straight into the arms of MenHealth.

Duke replaced the file, searched for the current year.

April 12: Asked if the subject had shared her belief in her supposed psychic powers with her old/new friend Robert Duke. Has not done so. Expects either disbelief or rejection.

April 14: Duke a disturbing influence. Martha obviously nostalgic in his presence, talking for the first time in years of writing new songs, resuming her career. Duke a rather sad case: only partly reformed Don Juan, failed Peter Pan.

April 17: Persists in belief in forward amnesia. "Almost remembers" something of critical importance that will happen in this house. . . .

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"Interesting reading?"

He turned to see Rosie framed in the doorway.

"You're reading Martha's files aren't you? Wait until I tell Murray. And Martha. Martha's really going to love this."

"Rosie, let me explain."

"You wanted to find out what Martha was saying about you? How good she thinks you are in bed?"

"No," he said. "I was trying to find proof that Murray Snow is a MenHealth agent."

"A what?"

"This will take some time. Let's get out of here."

They sat on the parched brown lawn in front of the house, and he told Rosie the story.

"Yes, of course," she said, her initial skepticism giving way to excitement. "Of course those MenHealth bastards would hate Martha's guts. They never want anyone to have any fun."

Rosie, Duke reflected, might have had her own run-ins with MenHealth workers.

"Oh yeah," she said. "Yeah, Murray is always discouraging her from going back to work. Telling her that Daniel needs her here, that she couldn't take the pressure. . . . He must be working for them."

"But I can't prove it."

"I'll help you prove it. Murray and me, we've been quite . . . *close.*"

"Close?" he echoed, startled. They had done a good job of hiding it. Or perhaps he had been too involved with Martha to pay attention.

"We sort of fell into it. He's a very good guy to talk to. I didn't know he was here to spy on Martha, kill her."

She reached over and squeezed his hand. "But now I know. And I'm going to get that bastard. Leave him to me."

Rosie, he thought as he watched her skip across the grass back to the house, was an unguided missile. Right now she thought she was in some kind of movie. But probably she was going to screw everything up in her zeal to catch Snow. Or else she would get tired of the role, and tell Snow everything just for the hell of it.

It was time to talk to Martha.

* * *

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"There's something you should know," he told Martha as she came down the stairs. She seemed to flinch.

"Yes," she said. "I guess there is."

They sat in the living room. He told her first about Parker, and the deal that he had proposed. "Except, I didn't agree. There was no deal."

"I believe you, Robert," she said. "But that's not all that's troubling you, is it?"

She listened intently to his story, taking it all in calmly. Too calmly.

"Murray working for MenHealth? I can't believe that. I've known him for years. . . ."

"And for years, he's been working to keep you off the stage. Spying on you. Betraying you."

"Murray is my friend. Even if he *is* spying on me, better him than someone else."

"You're not listening to me, Martha. He's planning to kill you."

"I'm sorry. I don't believe that."

"You can't take a chance. You could be killed."

"No."

"No? You think you're immortal?"

"Oh, I'm going to die. But not here, not now. It doesn't hap —" She stopped herself.

"It doesn't happen that way? Is that what you were going to say?"

"Yes."

He gave a sharp, barking laugh.

"You find that funny?" she asked.

"But it *is* funny, Martha. Me trying to persuade you that your life is in danger. And you sitting here thinking you're perfectly safe, all because of some crazy idea that you could once see the future."

"I never told you that."

"Parker told me. And then I read Snow's notes."

She sighed. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way. I wanted to tell you myself, but I wasn't sure how you'd react."

"We all have problems, Martha. You're entitled to yours. As long as you don't let them stop you from saving your life."

"So you don't believe it? You think it's just a delusion?"

"What else can it be?"

"I really could see the future. And I can still remember little bits of it,

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enough to know that it doesn't end here. Soon I'm going to write some new songs, and I'll go home to record them. And you. . . ."

"Yes?"

"You'll come with me."

"Don't count on it, Martha."

"I know this is hard for you to accept."

"I *don't* accept it. No one can see the future. Not you, and not your son, either."

She stiffened. "Daniel? What has he been saying?"

"He told me a few weeks ago that an astronaut would die. And someone else, someone in this house. Maybe me."

"He said that?" Her face tightened with anger. "You should have told me. I don't want him saying things like that."

"Monkey see, monkey do. He's picked up this phony fortune-telling act from you."

She shook her head. "Daniel really does see, the way I used to."

"Bullshit."

"But an astronaut did die, didn't he?"

"Lucky guess, that's all."

"And he said someone else would die? Who?"

"He won't tell me. Why don't you look in your own crystal ball and find out?"

She drew away from his sarcasm.

"You think you're angry with me," she said quietly. "But really, you are just frightened. Frightened to believe."

"Now you're a mind-reader? Believe me, Martha, I *am* angry. Angry enough to take the next plane out of here. I'm going to stick around because you need my help, even if you're not willing to admit it. But don't push me too far."

She was blinking back tears now. "We'll get through this, Robert. Somehow we'll get through it."

"You think you remember that? Maybe you remembered wrong. Tell me something. What if I did get on a plane, and you never saw me again? Would that prove that you're wrong about all this?"

"But you won't."

"We'll see, Martha."

"Yes," she said. "We'll see."

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That night, for the first time in many nights, Duke slept alone in the guest bedroom. He woke suddenly in the middle of the night. In the moonlight streaming through the window, he glimpsed the figure of a woman in a short white nightdress.

"Martha?" he asked, reaching for the bedside light.

"Rosie," she said, her hand reaching out to stop him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Snow got a fax tonight."

"What?"

"I went to his place after dinner. We were sitting around talking, and then the machine started up. He tore off the sheet and stared at it for a moment. Then he crumpled it up and threw it in the wastebasket. After he was asleep, I went back into the living room and found it. There was just one word on the sheet. *Green.* Get it? Green for *go.* They're giving him the go-ahead to kill Martha."

"Let me see it."

"I put it back, in case he looked for it in the morning."

"Anyway, you did well, Rosie," he said. "Very well."

"I knew you'd want to hear about it right away."

"Yes. But what can I do about it? I tried to warn Martha, but she wouldn't listen. I don't know what else to do."

"Gus," she said. "We should tell Gus. He'll take care of it."

He looked at her, startled. Of course they should tell Gus. That was his job, after all, to protect Martha. "You're right. I'll talk to him in the morning."

"I'll do it. Coming from you, he may not believe it. But I know how to handle Gus." She touched his arm. "Don't worry; Martha will be all right. Gus and me, we'll take care of everything. You can relax now."

She sat next to him on the bed. "You can just relax," she said again, reaching to stroke his hair.

"What are you doing, Rosie?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't think it's a great idea."

"Tell me what Martha does, and I'll do it. Exactly like her."

She put her arms around him. He felt both aroused and repelled. He removed her hands as gently as he could.

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"Rosie, this has been a hard day for me. And tomorrow could be even harder. So why don't we both just get some sleep."

"You think you're somebody, don't you, Robert? You really do." He could hear the anger he might have expected in her voice, but also a surprising and powerful sadness. It was almost enough to make him reach out to her. "But you're not. You're not anything at all."

"Everyone is somebody, Rosie."

Even you, he wanted to say, but did not.

"Coming down to the beach? Martha asked.

"I guess."

As Duke walked down to the beach with Martha, Gus tagged along behind them, as always. It was so familiar a sight that Duke rarely noticed it, but today he took great comfort in it. Gus took his customary position on the concrete storm wall that overlooked the beach, while they settled down on the sand. Later, looking up, he saw Gus immersed in conversation with Rosie.

When he looked back, neither Rosie nor Gus were in sight. "Where's Gus?" he asked Martha, surprised.

"I don't know. Maybe he went to the bathroom. I've told him often enough that he doesn't have to watch me every moment,"

Gus did not return. Duke fretted quietly. What if Snow were to make his move now?

They walked back to the house for lunch.

"Seen Gus?" he asked Snow.

"No. Were you looking for him?"

"How about Rosie?"

"I think she went into town."

The afternoon wore on. Duke sat on the porch, flipping restlessly through a book. Martha went upstairs to work with Daniel on his home schooling. Later she came down and strolled off in the direction of Snow's cottage. Duke watched her worriedly.

Where in the hell was Gus?

He got up and went into the house. He found Daniel watching a cartoon on the wallscreen. "Seen Gus?" he asked.

"Not since this morning. I saw him with Rosie, coming up the stairs when I was coming down."

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So that was Rosie's idea of handling Gus.

He went back out onto the patio and tried to settle down again with his book, but he could not concentrate. He was thinking about Rosie. *Very unstable type,* Parker had said. And Daniel had said, *She thinks she's Mummy.*

He got up and looked for Daniel again. This time he found him squatting down on the stone path by the side of the house, apparently engrossed in watching ants scurry back and forth.

"Daniel, have you noticed anything about Rosie? Anything different?"

"Rosie?" the boy said. "Rosie is going crazy. She thinks she's Mummy, but she knows she's not, so she's very sad. Pretty soon she's going to try to kill herself. Except that she's not sure which one is her."

"Which one?"

"Her or Mummy. Which one is really her."

Duke turned and ran up the stairs to Rosie's room and knocked on the door. There was no response. He turned the handle, but the door was locked.

He forced the door open. There was no sign of Rosie. But Gus was on the bed, naked on top of the sheets, apparently asleep. There was a pillow with a large burn mark in its center over his head. When Duke lifted it up, he saw the bullet wound.

He ran down the stairs and through the terrace doors to the garden. Daniel looked up briefly from his study of the ants as Duke raced past him toward the guest cottage.

Martha was sitting alongside Snow on the couch. Rosie was standing up, pointing a gun at them. She turned quickly as he came in.

"Sit," she said in a flat, dead voice, waving the gun in the direction of the couch. "Over there."

Instead, he ran toward her, grabbing for the gun. There was an explosion.

She shot me, he thought. *She actually shot me.*

And then the world turned upside down.

VIII

WITH DENNING assuming command of the mission, a command that Fuller challenged only infrequently and in an increasingly desultory manner, they took things easier after Wyatt died, easier and easier, until, in the end, they hardly

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ventured outside their base at all.

Control was pissed off, of course, but there was nothing that Control could do about it. "The sandstorms are worse than we expected." Denning would say. "You've seen the footage."

It was very boring, sitting around waiting for the right configuration of planets to make the trip home. Denning did his best to occupy himself, rereading mystery novels or fooling with cellular-automation programs on the computer.

Fuller, though, was pretty much at a loss. Fuller did not want to work, but neither did he want to read, or play computer games, or even play cards on the few occasions that Denning suggested it. Fuller was stupefyingly bored most of the time, and his boredom could very quickly cross over into anger.

"I can't stand it," he would say. "I just can't stand it. I never knew it would be like this. What kind of an idea was it anyway, sending us here? They knew what a godforsaken dump this was, but they sent us anyway. And why did we let them do it to us? So we could get our pictures on the evening newsvid? I can't believe I let them do this to me."

Much of what Fuller said made sense to Denning, but he didn't want to hear it over and over again. When Fuller started up on one of his rants, Denning would try to escape to his books or his programs. Failing that, he would close his eyes and try to doze off, knowing that Fuller wouldn't notice. Except that he found it hard to sleep these days. Every time he closed his eyes, the pattern would start flashing across his retina, the weird, elusive flickering pattern.

And then one day, in the middle of one of those ritualized conversations, Fuller broke the script.

"Hey Denning," he said, raising his hand in front of his eyes as if to shield them. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Doing?" Denning echoed. He opened his eyes. "I'm trying to get some sleep; what does it look like?"

"You're, I don't know, you're *flashing*, man; there's this weird *light* coming out of you. . . ."

Looking down, Denning could see that his whole body appeared to be flickering in and out of existence. "Hey," he said, "I think I'm. . . ."

And then he was no longer in the dome. He was someplace else, where the light was too bright and the pull of gravity too strong. Incredibly,

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impossibly, he was back on Earth.

The pattern that he had glimpsed on the cave wall was inside his head now, all the way inside, filling him up with a new knowledge. And there were things he had to do.

He was in a small town somewhere, shivering in a thin business suit on a brisk fall day. He was staring through a wire-mesh fence at some kids playing in a schoolyard. He saw the one he needed to touch, a small blonde girl. She looked up and met his glance, then quickly looked away.

Later he followed her home and talked his way into the house. He touched the girl, and a part of the pattern that was inside him rushed into her head.

He left the house, and felt himself flickering again. Now he was in a hotel room, looking at his younger self groping drunkenly with the singer from the party at the Space Center.

"I'm sorry, kid," he said, reaching out to touch his earlier self on the forehead, feeling the man go rigid and slump to the floor. "Those are the breaks."

He put the younger Denning in the bathroom. And he made love to the singer.

"I don't understand," the singer told him before he flickered from the room. "I don't understand what any of this is about."

"You will," he told her, "in the end."

Now he was in some house in Greece. A man and a woman were sitting on a couch. Denning recognized the woman as the singer. Another woman, who looked something like the singer, was standing over them, holding a gun.

The people in the room were unaware of his presence. He was flickering too fast for them to see him. He watched as a man came through the door and rushed at the woman with the gun. She shot him, and he toppled slowly to the floor. The woman with the gun began to turn toward the singer.

But the singer was not supposed to die that day. Denning touched the woman with the gun until he felt her go rigid. The man who had been sitting on the couch stood up and took the weapon away from her.

Denning left the cottage and moved up to the terrace of the house, where a small boy was squatting on the ground, studying ants. Denning slowed the flickering until the boy could see him.

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"Neat stuff," the boy said. "Can you teach me how to do that?"

"I'm your father," he said.

"I know," the boy said.

"I can't stay now. But I'll be back."

"Yes. On your ship."

"O.K.," he said. "Good."

He reached out and ruffled the boy's hair. Then the flickering came again and carried him away.

In the dome on Mars, Jake Denning woke from strange dreams with a raging headache, feeling like he had not slept at all.

"Hey Fuller," he said. "Did you see. . . ."

"What?" Fuller asked blankly. Clearly, he did not remember what had happened, if anything had happened at all.

"Nothing."

There was something he was trying to recall, something about his dreams, about a singer and her child and a pattern in his mind. But it was all slipping away from him now.

Maybe it would come back to him.

IX

ROBERT DUKE awoke in a hospital bed with Martha sitting by his bedside. The clock radio on the night table told him that he had lost an entire day. There was a pain deep in his chest.

"You're all right," he said.

"I'm the one who should be saying that."

"She shot me." He remembered his vast surprise. "And then what?"

"She froze up. Just stood there staring down at you on the ground, as though she couldn't believe what she'd done. Murray was able to get the gun away from her."

"Rosie was the sleeper all along."

"It wasn't her fault, Robert. Murray says they programmed her to do it. They've been working on her for years, the MenHealth people, playing on her inner conflicts."

"What will happen to her now?"

"We'll make sure she gets help. Murray knows a place in Switzerland. He'll make the arrangements before he heads home."

"Murray is leaving?"

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She smiled ruefully. "It's funny the way things happened. But I don't need him anymore. My music came back. I woke up this morning, and I heard it in my head. My new music."

"You saved our lives, Robert."

"By getting myself shot?"

"If you hadn't come in, she would have killed us."

"Would she? I don't know, Martha. Maybe I made no difference at all. It wasn't time for you to die, remember? You told me that."

She nodded reluctantly.

"You knew all along," he said. "Knew what was going to happen. Rosie killing Gus, trying to kill me."

"No, Robert, I didn't know any of that. You have to believe that. It was horrible, seeing you fall. For a moment, I thought that you were dead. And then. . . ."

"Then?"

"I knew that you were going to be all right. I saw you here in the hospital, and then back at the house with me. . . ."

"What are you trying to tell me, Martha? That it came back? Your gift came back?"

"Yes. Maybe it came back because I needed it. I needed to know that you would be all right."

He shook his head wearily. "And you expect me to believe you now? Believe that you can see the future?"

"I think you already believe it."

"I guess I do. Because Daniel was right, all the way down the line. And if he can see the future, why not you? The more the merrier, right?"

Accepting it, finally, he felt a strange dizziness, as though he were looking down on himself from a great height.

"Are you O.K., Robert?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. This is still a little weird for me." Sweat was pouring down his face. He wiped at it with a shaky hand. "You think I'm going to be able to handle it?"

"Yes."

"You predict it, in other words? You predict that I'm going to hang in there with you?" He realized that he was shouting. The effort made his chest throb with pain.

"I wasn't making a prediction."

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"But you see it, don't you?"

"I should be going," Martha said. "You need to get some rest. This is just upsetting you. . . ."

"What's to get upset about? A little thing like losing your free will?"

She gave him a sad little smile. "You learn to live with that. When you've had enough practice."

"I don't know if I can learn to live with a woman who sees the future. And her son who runs around making predictions about it."

"I'll make him stop."

"But he'll still see it. Even if he doesn't tell me about it, I'll read it in his eyes. And in yours."

"Read what?"

"I don't know. Dead astronauts. Earthquakes. Riots. Assassinations. My own death . . . I'm really not sure how I could live with that."

"You need to think about it, Robert. But first, you need to sleep." She got up. "I'll see you tomorrow."

His manager called the next morning to inquire about his health, and to ask when he would be ready to go back in the recording studio.

"To record what, exactly?"

"We have a deal, Bobby. A very good deal."

"Tell them to screw off. I'm not interested in their deal."

"I didn't even tell you who it is."

"It's RealTime, right?"

"They made noises. But EntCorp came through with the best offer."

"EntCorp wants me? Why?"

"I've had half a dozen offers since this hit the newsfax lines. You're hot, Bobby. You're a hero. You saved Martha Nova's life."

"Not really. . . ."

"I like modesty, Bobby, in the right time and place. So when are you coming back?"

"Tell them I'm coming back when I have something to say."

He hung up the phone.

Snow dropped by to see him on his way out to the airport.

"Unbelievable," he said, "that they could try something like this. I know some of the senior people in MenHealth. I always thought they

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were first-rate. True idealists."

"Sometimes they're the ones you have to watch."

"You should have come to me. I could have tried to stop it."

"Except that I thought you were their guy. And it wasn't something that could be stopped. We had to play it through to the end."

"You're starting to sound like Martha. That cheerful fatalism. . . ."

"I'll have to watch that."

"Take care of her, Robert."

Duke was too tired to challenge Snow's unspoken assumption that he would be staying with Martha.

Later the boy came to his hospital room alone. "Hi," he said. "How are you feeling?"

Duke was momentarily speechless to hear the boy inquiring after his health.

"Better," he said finally. "Where's your mother?"

"Talking to the doctor about when you can come home with us."

"I don't know if I will be. I may be heading back to L.A."

The boy looked uncomfortable.

"What's the matter, Daniel? You feel a revelation coming on, but your mother told you to keep quiet? It's O.K., I give you my personal permission, just this once."

The boy said nothing.

"Look, Daniel, I know you don't like me very much. Wouldn't you be glad to get rid of me?"

"No," Daniel said. "You should come home. For Mummy."

"And you'll try to get used to me?"

"Yes."

"Tell me something. It was Gus who was going to die all along, right?"

"Yes," the boy said, clearly reluctant to discuss the subject. "It was Gus."

"Then was it necessary, what I did? Getting myself shot, trying to save your mother?"

The boy pondered.

"It was necessary. Everything that happens is necessary."

Parker came to see him the day before his release from the hospital.

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"Sorry I couldn't get here earlier. All hell breaking loose back home. Three resignations so far in the MenHealth senior-management team, and we're pushing for more."

"You won."

"The battle, anyway. We'll see about the war. I want to thank you for what you did. I didn't mean for you to take it that far. You should have called for backup."

"There was no time."

"The doctors say you were very lucky. A centimeter to the side. . . ."

"I was never in any real danger."

"How do you figure that?"

"Martha saw that I would live. So there was never any doubt about it."

Parker stared at him, unblinking.

"Do you understand what I'm saying? Martha really could see the future once. It was no delusion. And now she can see it again."

"Interesting."

"Interesting? That's all you have to say?"

"It confirms something we suspected, based on content analysis of her songs. She did seem able to make forecasts way beyond the level of chance."

"Then why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it was unconfirmed. And it didn't seem to have anything to do with the situation."

"It had everything to do with the situation."

"It would be useful if you could write up a report for us on your observations."

"I don't work for you, Parker, remember? And I never did."

"We'd also be interested in hearing what she's predicting on an ongoing basis. That could be extremely helpful."

"You know exactly what she predicts, Parker. The end of the world. As far as I know, she hasn't revised her forecast."

"Yes, but when does she think it will happen? How? We need to know these things."

"But if she's right, what good could it possibly do you?"

"There may be something we could do to stop it. . . . Or she could be speaking metaphorically. We need to know what she sees. We need to be able to gauge the potential impact on her followers."

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"I'm not going to spy on Martha for you. You'll have to find yourself another boy."

Parker got up. "What are your plans now? I hear you have a new recording offer."

"I don't exactly have plans. I'm going to stay here with Martha for the moment. Afterward . . . we'll see."

Martha was busy with her music now. Duke would sit watching her for hours as she programmed her synthesizer or sang into her hand-held terminal. The new songs were coming to her almost effortlessly, as though some inner voice were singing them to her. The new songs were a lot like her old ones, but purer somehow, almost hypnotically simple, refined down to the very essence of Martha Nova.

"Why now?" he asked. "Why did the music come back to you now?"

"Because it was time, I suppose."

"You mean time to make a comeback?"

She hesitated. "More than that, Robert. This is the end of the cycle. Or at least, the beginning of the end."

He felt a thrill of fear. "That's what you see?"

"It's what I've always seen. And now it's coming. Finally."

"I can't believe I'm sitting here listening to you talk about the end of the world. And believing you."

"Not exactly the end of the world, Robert. The world will go on. People will go on, too, I think . . . but not in the same way. Everything will be different."

"How?"

"I don't know. I don't see that far ahead."

"Why not?"

"It's like I hit a barrier. It's like. . . ." Her eyes briefly filled up with tears. "Actually, it's like I'm dead. I don't see beyond a certain point, because I won't be here to see it."

She leaned against him, and he held her quietly for a few minutes. Then she drew back and fumbled for a tissue.

"I should start thinking about packing," she said.

"Packing?"

"I have to go home soon. I have to record this music."

"What if you just stayed here with me?"

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"I can't, Robert. You know that."

He nodded. "Yes. I guess I know that."

"I was hoping you'd come with me, but you're welcome to stay on here as long as you like. . . ."

He laughed. "You know I'm going to come with you, Martha. You told me, remember."

"I guess I was hoping that you'd *want* to come with me."

"Of course," he said. "Of course I want to."

Fuller whooped with delight as the ship swung perfectly into its preprogrammed arc toward Earth. "I can't believe it," he said. "I can't believe we're actually going home."

"Right," Denning agreed. "Home."

Home. That was all he had wanted, ever since they had left Earth, to get back home. Except that he was no longer sure what that meant.

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For the first time in a long time, he thought about Hilda. He had not messaged her in months, despite Control's urging. And after a while, she had given up on her own perfunctory end of the correspondence. Too busy drinking herself to death, no doubt. If he was lucky.

No, it was hard to get very excited about going home. He was just too tired for that, so very tired. Maybe, on the voyage back, he would finally be able to get some sleep. Maybe he would stop having such weird dreams.

On the screen, he could see Earth, a tiny bright speck across the great gulf of emptiness. Waiting for him.

Briefly, a familiar latticelike pattern flickered across his retina. He rubbed his eyes.

"Glory," Fuller said. "Money. Sex. Liquor. Here we come."

"Right," Denning said again. "Here we come."

The ship raced onward, closer and closer to Earth.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 56

In the April issue, we asked you to send us the music for the movie version of your favorite science fiction or fantasy work. The entries that worked the best were the ones that combined elements of the story with elements of the song (instead of just linking titles). The most common combinations were "Dust in the Wind" for Dune; "Both Sides Now" for *Left Hand of Darkness;* "Send in the Clowns" for *It;* "Pennies from Heaven" for *Heaven·Cent;* and "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" for *To Your Scattered Bodies Go.* Pay attention, Hollywood, should you ever decide to make (or remake) these films. The award for the song that could be applied to the most sf/f works goes to "I've Got You Under My Skin" which had over ten different applications, including *Blood Music, Fantastic Voyage,* and *Alien Within.*

We also learned a bit about our readers — at least those who enter the competition. Your taste in music runs from Metallica to Sonny and Cher, from Garth Brooks to Mozart. Fortunately, our taste in music is eclectic too, or we would have been lost. (We added performers and authors only when the contributors did, though. No sense pressing our luck — especially without the proper musical reference materials.)

FIRST PRIZE

"It Takes a Man Like Me to Love a Woman Like Me" Wayne Country for *Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin.

"True Men Don't Kill Coyotes" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers for "Last of the Winnebagos" by Connie Willis.
"Forever Young" by Rod Stewart for "Jeffty is Five" by Harlan Ellison.

— David Slusher
Leesburg, GA

SECOND PRIZE

"Two Faces Have I" by Lou Christie for "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" by Robert Louis Stevenson.
"Don't Mess with Bill" by the Marvellettes for *Bill, the Galactic Hero* by Harry Harrison.
"Big Man in Town" by the Four Seasons for *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift.

— Richard H. Langley
Nacogdoches, TX

RUNNERS UP

"I Hear You Knocking" for "The Monkey's Paw."
"At the Hop" for *Watership Down.*

— William S. Cornell
Emmett, MI

"Sex Machine" by James Brown for *Friday* by Robert Heinlein.
"Hell Ain't A Bad Place to Be" by AC/DC for *Heros in Hell.*
"*Magical Mystery Tour*" by the Beatles for *Fantastic Voyage* by Isaac Asimov

— David S. Bloch
Portland, OR

"Seventh Son of a Seventh Son" by Iron Maiden for *Seventh Son* by Orson Scott Card
"Paranoid" by Black Sabbath for *The Illuminatus Trilogy.*

— Sam Robb
San Diego, CA

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HONORABLE MENTIONS

"Blowin' in the Wind" for *The Wizard of Oz.*
"One Bad Apple" for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.*
— Johanna Schenk
Stockton, CA

"Don't Get Around Much Anymore" for *Misery.*
"Hello, I Love You, Won't You Tell Me Your Name?" for any classic Star Trek (Kirk's Song).
— Michele Winkler
(et. al)
Santa Cruz, CA

—"Calling Elvis" by Dire Straits for *Return of the King.*
— Lisa M. Ray
Casselberry, FL

"Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair" (traditional) for *Sister Light, Sister Dark* by Jane Yolen.
— Jane Yolen
Scotland

"Hey, Hey, We're the Monkees" for *Planet of the Apes.*
— John S. Quinn
Holbrook, MA

COMPETITION 57 (suggested by Donald Franson)

VANITY PLATES

Because we spend so much time in our cars, many of us express ourselves on our license plates. Even the science fiction community has gotten into the act, with licenses that read SF FAN or CTHULHU. The rules imposed by the states are that the licenses not exceed seven (or is it eight?) letters, and must not be obscene (unless they're cleverly worded to get past the censor). Most of the common ones are already on the road, so we're looking for the unusual, the sublime, or the just plain funny. Please finish your license plates (and mail in the applications) no later than September 15.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by Sept. 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 57 will appear in the January Issue.

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STEPHEN KING ISSUE: Limited edition of F&SF's December 1990 issue has a special cover stock and is available for only $10.00, plus $1.50 p/h. Mercury Press, PO Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

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Coming Attractions

CHARLES DE LINT'S story, "Bridges," provides the inspiration for Ron Walotsky's cover painting on the October/November issue. "Bridges" is a story about choices, a theme that dominates our 43rd anniversary issue.

Algis Budrys' new novel, *Hard Landing*, is the heart of the issue. This story of four aliens who crash-land on Earth is relentless, fast-paced, and just plain good. Even though readers of this magazine are familiar with Algis's criticism, his previous novels (including *Rogue Moon*, *Michaelmas*, and *Who?*) are classics in the field. *Hard Landing* promises to join them.

Another classic sf writer, **Jack Williamson,** makes a long-awaited return to these pages. "The Bird's Turn" is a wonderful sf story by a man whose short fiction first appeared in 1928, and whose story "The Humanoids" still provides the basis for much of what is written in sf today. Jack spends most of his time on novels; his last short story appeared four years ago. We're proud to have this one.

Nebula and Hugo award winner **Joe Haldeman** also makes an appearance in this issue with a creepy Vietnam story called "Graves." **Gene Wolfe, Terry Bisson** and a number of other award-winning writers will join him in making our 43rd anniversary double issue one of the best yet.

Our 44th year will also have some wonderful fiction. We have novellas lined up from **Nancy Springer, Kate Wilhelm,** and **Jack Cady. Nina Kiriki Hoffman** will make her first appearance in these pages, as will **Bridget McKenna, Madeleine E. Robins,** and many other excellent new writers. Old favorites will return as well. We have short stories from **Ian Watson, Lawrence Watt-Evans,** and **Brian Aldiss** lined up.

So prepare yourself for a fall filled with reading. We have some special treats in store for you.

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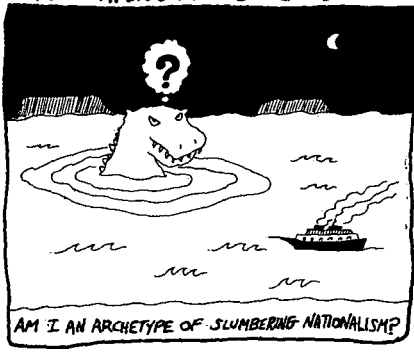
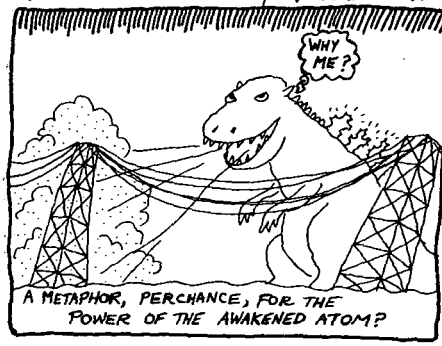
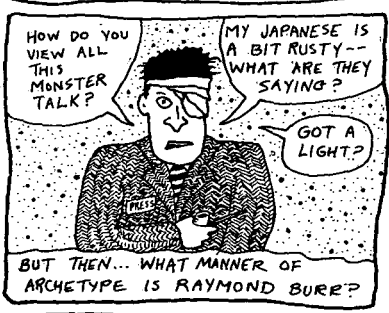
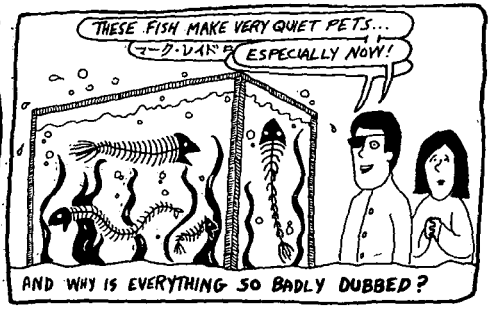
THE THINKING MAN'S "GODZILLA" (PRETENTIOUS B-MOVIES) by MARC LAIDLAW





DID I TAKE A WRONG TURN SOMEWHERE?
OR (MORE LIKELY) A COLLECTIVE RECOLLECTION OF THE ATOMIC BLAST, HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI FOREVER LOOMING ON MEMORY'S HORIZON, EMITTING GOUTS OF FIRE AND SCREAMING WITH THE VOICE OF RENDING STEEL...?


HOW DO YOU VIEW ALL THIS MONSTER TALK?
MY JAPANESE IS A BIT RUSTY-- WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?
GOT A LIGHT?
PBS
BUT THEN... WHAT MANNER OF ARCHETYPE IS RAYMOND BURR?



THE PROCESS OF SELF-DISCOVERY IS UNENDING... PERHAPS CYCLICAL...
WHOA... DEJA VU!
EARTHLINGS! WE WOULD LIKE TO BORROW YOUR GODZILLA FOR A SEQUEL!
...NOT EVEN MONSTER ZERO CAN BRING IT TO AN END.....

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Compact Space
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C.J. CHERRYH

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Ten years have passed since the events of CHANUR'S HOMECOMING, and Pyanfar, captain of *The Pride,* has become the most important personage in the Compact, while her niece Hilfy is captain of her own vessel, *Chanur's Legacy.* When Hilfy accepts a million credits to transport a small, mysterious "religious" object, she finds herself caught in an ever-tightening web of intrigue. And only time will tell whether the young captain can determine who is truly her ally and who her enemy in this deadly game of interstellar politics...

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